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Cartesian modality: God's nature and the creation of eternal and contingent truth

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CARTESIAN MODALITY: GOD'S NATURE AND THE CREATION OF ETERNAL AND CONTINGENT TRUTH

by

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

PH.D. THESIS

This is to certify that the Ph.D. thesis of

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for the thesis requirement for the Doctor of Philosophy
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There is nothing so strange and so unbelievable that it has not been said by one philosopher or another.

René Descartes
Discourse on the Method

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ABSTRACT

Much ado has been made regarding Descartes's understanding of the creation of what he called the "eternal truths" because he described them, paradoxically, as both the free creations of God and as necessary. While there are many varying interpretations of Cartesian modality, the issue has heretofore been treated in a vacuum, as a niche issue having little import beyond being an interesting puzzle for Descartes Scholars. I argue that this treatment is misguided, and that in order to properly understand Cartesian philosophy at all, one must properly understand Descartes's theory of modality. This, however, is no small feat; in order to understand Descartes's seemingly peculiar view on modality, one must first make sense of what Descartes understood the nature of God to be. One reason for this, I argue, is the systematic nature of Cartesian philosophy; indeed when dealing with a dense inter-connection of philosophical issues, one must move from what is more known in itself to what is more known to us, and not the other way around.

I argue that in the literature on Cartesian modality, insufficient attention has been paid to the influence of the French School of Spirituality (in particular the work of Cardinal Bérulle) on the Cartesian notion of the divine. I argue that this influence pushed Descartes to criticize traditional attempts (Aquinas's in particular) to split the horns of Plato's Euthyphro dilemma as violating a proper understanding of the doctrine of divine simplicity. Descartes's commitment to a radical form of the doctrine of divine simplicity leads him to a version of divine voluntarism wherein all 'things' depend on God for their existence, and God *cannot* have had antecedent reason to prefer the creation of anything over anything else. There is little doubt that Descartes embraced the voluntarist horn of the Euthyphro dilemma, but just what that means for Cartesian modality and philosophy generally remains a contentious issue. I argue that Descartes is best read as what I call an 'theological mysterian' regarding God (and modality generally) given textual, historical, and systematic considerations. One virtue of an theological mysterian reading is that I am able to square the

passages where Descartes discusses the inconceivability of God's power with the conclusions reached regarding God's non-deceiving nature in the *Meditations* and elsewhere. Further virtues that I explore are the effects that a quietist reading has on the Cartesian scientific programme, the infamous mind-body problem, Descartes's seemingly inconsistent view regarding human free-will and Descartes's refusal to engage in theology.

Traditionally, Cartesian epistemology has been understood to be a purely *a priori* undertaking, which succumbs to deep and insurmountable problems. One of the greatest problems facing the Cartesian was the move from knowledge of the mind to knowledge of the world. Simon Blackburn, for example, says of the Cartesian epistemological project in the *Meditations* that Descartes "has put himself on a desert island from which there is no escape." This view is echoed by, and even motivates some of the contemporary views concerning Cartesian modality. I argue, however, that a proper understanding of the Cartesian doctrine of clear and distinct ideas circumvents this famous problem. By highlighting the proper understanding and application of the doctrine of clear and distinct ideas, I show that such ideas guarantee the existence of an external truth-maker, and that such ideas do not do much more than show *that there is a truth-maker*. I argue that in instances of clear and distinct perception, the truth of the idea is normatively certain, but what makes it true is yet to be established. In this way, clear and distinct ideas are both powerful, in terms of guaranteeing truth, and relatively unhelpful, in that further work is required in order to determine to what the ideas conform. I argue that this is the case not only for *actual* truths, but for *some* clearly intuited truths about possibility.

As an illustration of my overall thesis, I address the Cartesian argument for the separability of mind and body, and entertain the various interpretations of Descartes's view of human freedom. I argue that in order to understand Cartesian views on either of these issues, one must first make sense of his modal commitments. In both of these cases Descartes claims that finite minds can know *that* something is possible, even though what makes it possible is well beyond what they can understand.

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CHAPTER ONE: LAYING BARE THE SPACE OPEN TO INTERPRETERS OF DESCARTES'S CREATION DOCTRINE

Introduction

Like the study of any historical figure, Descartes scholarship has largely progressed by focusing on narrow issues within Descartes's writings and treating each issue with a deep reading of the primary texts relevant to the issue. When approaching a historical figure in this manner, many philosophers have tended to focus on the internal coherence of the view itself and consider, only as a secondary measure of success how the particular interpretation fits in with the broader views seemingly held by the philosopher being studied. This approach has its merits, and to be sure, it is important to have such sustained studies of narrow issues but such an interpretive strategy has its shortcomings as well. When approaching the modern philosophers generally, and more to my purposes Descartes specifically, tackling narrow issues in a vacuum (i.e. independent of broader systematic considerations) runs the risk of missing out on crucial evidence that helps to motivate and to clarify the internal coherence of what might otherwise appear to be an incoherent or unacceptable view.

When working with and trying to interpret systematic thinkers such as Descartes, however, how does one decide what is the appropriate entry point for inquiry? That is, when addressing what is effectively a philosophical plenum, where does one begin the interpretive process and how does she justify this as the appropriate point of entry. For Descartes scholarship the answer might *seem* obvious; after all, Descartes does tell us what his method is in at least two places. One might appeal to the method found in the *Meditations* and reiterated in the *Principles*. While this is tempting, to borrow this method for *interpreting* the Cartesian system would be a mistake. Indeed Descartes's method was one for finding true beliefs in the sciences and metaphysics, not for making sense of his views. As Aristotle suggested, while it is natural to focus on what is most evident to some particular agent, the

order of *discovery* is not the same as the natural order of *explanation*.[1] In Descartes's philosophy there is a key difference between what the first foundational truth that an agent comes to know—"I am, I exist"—and what is the most foundational truth—"that God exists, and at the same time […] that everything else depends on him..."[2] If we take seriously the method presented in the *Meditations*, then we see that the way to *know* the world is to start with foundational truths, knowable *a priori*, and move on to the world around us. In this case, what results from such a method does not obviously serve as an explanation of the world at all. Even if it did, every student of philosophy knows that what is most evident to the finite mind, according to Descartes, is its own existence. Equally known to every student of philosophy is how difficult it is to move from knowledge of the self to knowledge of the world. Still, Descartes does provide us with a hint as to the starting point; we must begin with God and move to creation. This is evident from *Principles* I.24 and from the *Third Meditation*, where Descartes moves from a discussion of self-knowledge to his first proof of God's existence.[3] And since, as we will see, all reality, whether actual or possible is

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[1] Such a methodology is not limited to Aristotle and Descartes, however. Other major thinkers have employed something like this distinction in order to clarify from where they begin their projects. Hume, for example, draws our attention to the very same distinction in his *Treatise on Human Nature* (T 1.1.2). He says, "Since it appears, that our simple impressions are prior to their correspondent ideas, and that the exceptions are very rare, method seems to require we should examine our impressions, before we consider our ideas. […] And as the impressions of reflexion, *viz.* passions, desires, and emotions, which principally deserve our attention, arise mostly from ideas, 'twill be necessary to reverse that method, which at first sight seems most natural; and in order to explain the nature and principles of the human mind, give a particular account of ideas, before we proceed to impressions. For this reason I have here chosen to begin with ideas." Hume is here doing just what the opposite of what I suggest Descartes urges us to do. That this is counter-intuitive is not lost on Hume, however, as he points out that what I call the order of things is the most natural starting point. (Hume 1978).

[2] *Fifth Meditation* (CSM II, p. 48).

[3] In the *Principles* passage, Descartes writes, "Now since God alone is the true cause of everything which is or can be, it is very clear that the best path to follow when we philosophize will be to start from knowledge of God himself and try to deduce an explanation of the things created by him. This is the way to acquire the most perfect scientific knowledge, that is, knowledge of effects through their causes" (CSM I, p. 201).

dependent on God's omnipotence, it is best to understand what God is and what we can say or know about God in order to understand what God can create. It is God's existence and non-deceiving nature that is supposed to ground our knowledge of the world around us. Still, Descartes's argument for God's existence relies on God's nature rather than the way that finite minds come to know about God's nature. To wit, Descartes's *a posteriori* argument relies on God's being the total and efficient cause of Itself.[4]

In the *Third Meditation*, Descartes offers at least one *a posteriori* argument for God's existence (some commentators suggest that there are two distinct arguments).[5] It is only in the *Fifth Mediation* that we see an *a priori* argument. Furthermore, in the *Conversation with Burman*, Descartes suggests that the *a posteriori* argument(s) actually have priority over the ontological proof.[6] If Descartes's method was to start with the order of discovery and move to the order of things, one would intuitively expect the ontological argument to hold priority over any kind of *a posteriori* argument, or at least to show up first in the *Meditations*. Yet this is not the case. Instead Descartes introduces an argument for God's existence that stresses God's infinite nature on the basis of a comparison between the clearly understood idea of the self as finite, and the idea we possess of God. By engaging in this comparison, the meditator comes to recognize that "having an idea of a finite being depends on—and is

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[4] Unless otherwise noted, all textual references to Descartes's work will refer to *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes vols. I, II*, eds. Cottingham, Stoothoff, Murdoch, Cambridge University Press, 1985 (CSM); and *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes vol. III*, eds. Cottingham, Stoothoff, Murdoch, Kenny, Cambridge University Press, 1991 (CSMK). Descartes describes God as a "*Causa Sui"* in the *Third Meditation* (CSM II, p. 38), and is subsequently pressed about this by Caterus in the *First Objections* (CSM II, p. 68) and by Arnauld in the *Fourth Objections* (CSM II, p. 146).

[5] See (Armogathe 1998).

[6] "[The ontological argument] could not have any force for an atheist, who would not allow himself to be convinced by it. Indeed, it is not suitable for this purpose, and the author does not wish to be understood in this way. It must rather be conjoined with other arguments concerning God, since it presupposes such arguments and takes God's existence as already proved by them" (CSMK, p. 340).

therefore posterior, rather than prior, to—having the requisite idea of an infinite being."[7] That the meditator recognizes that the idea of the self is posterior to the idea of God is a clear example of the order I think Descartes wants his readers to follow—viz. to move from God to creation.

It is not only in the *Third Meditation* that we find Descartes grounding explanation in God's nature, however. In Chapter Six of *Le Monde* Descartes begins his description of a "new world" by appeal to God's power. It is clear by the end of the work that the hypothetical world he is discussing is supposed to be at least very closely related to Earth. What is of particular interest in this chapter, however, is that the starting point for explaining all creation is God.

> For a while, then, allow your thought to wander beyond this world to view another world – a wholly new one which I shall bring into being before your mind in imaginary spaces. The philosophers tell us that such spaces are infinite, and they should certainly be believed, since it is they themselves who invented them. But in order to keep this infinity from hampering and confusing us, let us not try to go right to the end: let us enter it only far enough to lose sight of all the creatures that God made five or six thousand years ago; and after stopping in some definite place, let us suppose that God creates anew so much matter all around us that in whatever direction our imagination may extend, it no longer perceives any place as empty.[8]

Descartes continues in the same chapter to discuss that God divides matter into parts of varying sizes and devises laws of nature that govern the motion of the particles. These laws of nature appear again in part two of the *Principles*, immediately following the claim that "God is the primary cause of motion."[9] The reason that I mention the ultimate explanation of all phenomena in Descartes's physics is that I suspect recognizing the central role that

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[7] (Schechtman n.d.). Schechtman offers a full defense of this interpretation of the *Third Meditation* arguments here. For my purposes, I will only flag the interpretation as a point in favor of my more general argument.

[8] (CSM I, p. 90-91).

[9] (CSM I, p. 240).

God plays in Descartes's metaphysical system gives us an idea of where to enter into the plenum that is his philosophy. Just as Descartes asked us in *Le Monde* to imagine different ways the world might have been created without our prior commitments in order to put us in a position to understand the nature of creation, I suggest that we must strip away our philosophical commitments to narrow issues in Cartesian freedom, physics, or epistemology and properly work out what Descartes thought God is and was capable of doing. That is, we should begin the construction of Descartes's metaphysics with a consideration of what God would do, rather than with a specific view about Cartesian freedom or physics. Only then can we progress to the proper understanding of Cartesian physics, metaphysics, and epistemology, for clearly God is at the center of this philosophical plenum.

Making sense of Descartes's conception of God and what God is capable of doing is significantly easier said than done. In this chapter I intend to introduce and discuss the key passages in order to establish how Descartes understood God's nature and relationship to creation. Despite Descartes's prolific philosophical career, there is no single treatise explicitly dedicated to God's nature and relation to creation. Instead we have several works that have more specific aims—to establish and defend the heliocentric cosmology (*Le Monde*), to teach his physics (*The Principles*), to provide a grounding of his physics works in a stable metaphysics (*The Meditations*). In each of these Descartes discusses, though not exhaustively, God's nature. We also have passages from his correspondence. What each of these passages has in common, as we will see, is an emphasis on God's power and supremacy. This is important because the Cartesian commitment to omnipotence, and what the doctrine means for Descartes, has far-reaching consequences for the more specific issues important to Descartes scholars. In what follows, I will isolate the passages from Descartes's major works and from the correspondence relevant to God's nature and relation to necessity and possibility. I will then highlight four themes present in these passages and argue that depending on which theme one emphasizes, certain interpretive options are open to Descartes scholars regarding theories of modal metaphysics. In the final section of this

chapter I will discuss how these different interpretations bear on other important issues in Cartesian philosophy.

God and the Creation Doctrine: Descartes's Own Words

Throughout his life, Descartes seemed to claim in his various correspondences that God's power is so great that not even the laws of logic can impose any limitation on God. This entails the peculiar claim, God *freely* (indifferently) wills what Descartes calls "eternal truths"; truths that we take to be *necessary*, such as the laws of logic, mathematics, and conceptual truths. Descartes seems at times to think that it would be blasphemous to suggest that there could be any limitation on God's power. In light of this, Descartes seems to suggest that God has the power to make contradictions true; although, we will see that he is cagey about stating explicitly what God can and cannot do. What makes this view so very odd is that just as readily as Descartes seems to say that the eternal truths are true only in virtue of God's decree, he suggests that the very same truths are necessary. If, however, necessary truths depend entirely on God's *free* (indifferent) act of creation, then we might wonder in what sense these truths can properly be called necessary. After all, if God is supremely powerful, and creates by fiat all truths, both necessary and contingent, then it is unclear what grounds the necessity of certain truths.

We first find this paradoxical view stated clearly in a series of letters from 1630,

> [I]n 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 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 grasp 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 his subjects if he had

> enough power to do so. The greatness of God, on the other hand, is something which we cannot grasp even though we know it. But the very fact that we judge it beyond our grasp makes us esteem it 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.
>
> It will be said that if God had established these truths he could change them as a king changes his laws. To this the answer is: Yes he can, if his will can change. 'But I understand them to be eternal and unchangable' – I make the same judgment about God. 'But his will is free.' – Yes, but his power is beyond our grasp. In general we can assert that God can do everything that is within our grasp, but not that he cannot do what is beyond our grasp. It would be rash to think that our imagination reaches as far as his power.[10]

This is the first explicit statement of Descartes's views regarding modality. He states explicitly here that all of the innate ideas we possess, and the truths that we take to be necessary, are created in the same way that a king lays down laws… that is, by fiat. To claim otherwise would be to impugn God's sovereignty. It is worth mentioning that at this time, in 1630, Descartes was preparing his treatise on physics and cosmology, *Le Monde*. The book was never published during his life, and the closest Descartes gets therein to discussing "eternal truths" is in his treatment of the laws of motion, which he suggests follow from God's decree.[11] It is clear, however, that Descartes is here concerned with grounding all creation in the immense power God possesses. He is also particularly concerned with stressing the incomprehensibility of God's power for finite beings. In the second portion of

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[10] Descartes to Mersenne, 15, April 1630 (CSMK, p. 23)

[11] Chapter Seven of *Le Monde* (titled, "The laws of nature of this new world") begins, "…I am using this word [nature] to signify matter itself, in so far as I am considering it taken together with all the qualities I have attributed to it, and under the condition that God continues to preserve it in the same way that he created it. For it follows of necessity, from the mere fact that he continues thus to preserve it, that there must be many changes in its parts which cannot, it seems to me, properly be attributed to the action of God (because that action never changes), and which therefore I attribute to nature. The rules by which these changes take place I call the 'laws of nature'" (CSM I, pp. 92-93).

the above quotation, Descartes even engages with an imagined interlocutor regarding what can be known about God, God's power, and what God's sovereignty means for the eternality and necessity of mathematical truths. What follows from this discussion is that God's power is beyond our *grasp*, but we *know that* God is powerful to an extent beyond what we can truly understand.[12] That we cannot 'grasp' God's power entails that we are not in the proper epistemic position to know what God can and cannot do.

In his next letter to Mersenne, Descartes reiterates, and tries to clarify the theme that emerged in the dialogue with his imagined interlocutor:

> As for the eternal truths, I say once more that they 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 which 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. So we must not say that if God did not exist nevertheless these truths would be true; for the existence of God is the first and most eternal of all possible truths and the one from which alone all others proceed. It is easy to be mistaken about this because most people do not regard God as a being who is infinite and beyond our grasp, the sole author on whom all things depend; they stick at the syllables of his name and think it sufficient knowledge of him to know that 'God' means what is meant by *Deus* in Latin and what is adored by men. Those who have no higher thoughts than these can easily become atheists; and because they perfectly comprehend mathematical truths and do not perfectly comprehend God's existence it is no wonder they do not think the former depend on the latter. But they should rather take the opposite view, that since God is a cause whose power surpasses the bounds of human understanding, and 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.[13]

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[12] I will return to the distinction between 'grasping' and 'knowing' in Chapter Three.

[13] Descartes to Mersenne, 6, May 1630 (CSMK pp. 24-25)

Descartes once again stresses the incomprehensibility of God's power while stressing the supreme sovereignty God possesses over all creation. Paradoxically, while describing the power God possesses to create mathematical truths, Descartes seems to equate the necessity of such truths with the necessity and eternality of God's existence. Yet, to foist such an equivalence onto Descartes uncritically would be misguided; for Descartes, the existence of God is the "first and most eternal" truth, and it is only in virtue of this truth that all others follow. It is important to mention that this is not the only place in Descartes's writings that he appeals to God's existence as necessary,[14] and it is not at all obvious just what status this particular necessity is supposed to have. In the quote above it seems as if Descartes aims to draw a distinction in levels of necessity; as we will see, there are passages later which suggest that this is not a plausible line of interpretation. For now, I will highlight this as an open interpretive issue to which we will return later.

Still, in the quote immediately above we find another important piece in the puzzle—the view that in God, willing and knowing are identical. This is the first time that Descartes introduces the doctrine of divine simplicity (henceforth 'DDS'). This was the view that God,

> is radically unlike creatures in that he is devoid of any complexity or composition, whether physical or metaphysical. Besides lacking spatial and temporal parts, God is free of matter/form composition, potency/act composition, and existence/essence composition. There is also no real distinction between God as subject of his attributes and his attributes. God is

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[14] See: *Principles* I, 14, "In this one idea [the idea of God, which alone guarantees the existence of its object] the mind recognizes existence – not merely the possible and contingent existence which belongs to the ideas of all other things which it distinctly perceives, but utterly necessary and eternal existence. Now on the basis of its perception that, for example, it is necessarily contained in the idea of a triangle that its three angles should equal two right angles, *the mind is quite convinced* that a triangle does have three angles equaling two right angles. In the same way, simply on the basis of its perception that necessary and eternal existence is contained in the idea of a supremely perfect being, the mind must clearly conclude that the supreme being does exist" (CSM I, 197-8). Cf. *First Replies* (CSM II, p. 78), *Second Replies* (CSM II, p. 116), and *Fourth Replies* (CSM II, p. 162).

> thus in a sense requiring clarification identical to each of his attributes, which implies that each attribute is identical to every other one.[15]

While it is not yet clear to what extent Descartes is committed to DDS, what is clear is that he seems to think that the will and the intellect are identical. He does describe them as a "single thing," but in claiming that it is in virtue of willing something that God knows it, Descartes seems to be placing a conceptual priority on the divine will over the divine intellect. Such a priority marks a notable departure from Scholastic orthodoxy.[16] That Descartes departed from the teachings of the scholastics is not surprising (Descartes was famously a vicious critic of his scholastic predecessors), but it is important to the interpretive project. Since we are concerned to begin with God's nature, certainly an important part of that nature is whether and where priority lies in the Cartesian God's attributes. Conveniently, Descartes returns to the issue of divine simplicity and its relation to the eternal truths in his next letter to Mersenne,

> You ask me by what kind of causality God established the eternal truths. I reply: by the same kind of causality as he created all things, that is to say as their efficient and total cause. For it is certain that he 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. I do not conceive them as emanating from God like rays from the sun; but I know that God is the author of everything and that these truths are something and consequently that he is their author. I say I know this, not that I conceive or grasp it; because it is possible to know that God is infinite and all powerful although our soul, being finite cannot grasp or conceive him. In the same way we can touch a mountain with our hands but we cannot put our arms around it as we could put them around a tree or something else not too large for them. To grasp something is to embrace it in one's thought; to know something, it is sufficient to touch it with one's thought.

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15 (Vallicella 2014).

16 While there is considerable scholarly debate regarding Aquinas's account of DDS, there is good reason to think that Aquinas placed a priority on the divine intellect over the divine will. By doing so, he was able to rule out logical impossibilities as mere "nothingness," and thus could limit possibility to what was logically possible without impugning God's omnipotence. See: ST 46, 1 (p. 451), ST 44, 3 (p. 430), ST 26, 2 (p. 271), ST 25, 3 (p. 262), ST 11, 3 (p. 88), and ST 3, 7 (p. 34) (Aquinas 1997).

> You also asked what necessitated God to create these truths; and I reply that he was free to make it not true that all 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. You ask what God did in order to produce them. I reply that from all eternity he willed and understood them to be, and by that very fact he created them. Or, if you reserve the word 'created' for the existence of things, then he established and made them. In God, willing, understanding, and creating are all the same thing without one being prior to the other, even conceptually.[17]

At the end of this letter Descartes expresses a commitment to a stronger form of DDS. Willing, understanding, and God's creative act are all identical in the strongest sense here (there is not even a *conceptual distinction* between the attributes);[18] in the previous letter, Descartes described God's knowing as identical to the will and here he uses the term "understanding." Both "knowing" and "understanding" can plausibly be understood to refer to the attribute of the intellect in the Cartesian God, but what is notable is that God has also built into the strong identity relation the creative act—so God's sovereignty,[19] will, intellect, and act of creation are all strictly identical.

Descartes's commitment to DDS may play into, and help make sense of some of the Cartesian commitment to the incomprehensibility of the Cartesian God, a theme that is clearly emerging with regard to both God's nature and the creation of the eternal truths. What is also worth noting in this passage is that Descartes explicitly addresses whether God's will is necessitated to act; it is noteworthy that he seems to imply that God's will is *not*

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[17] Descartes to Mersenne, 27, May 1630 (CSMK pp. 25-6)

[18] In *Principles* I, 62, Descartes defines a "conceptual distinction" as, "a distinction between a substance and some attribute of that substance without which the substance is unintelligible; alternatively, it is a distinction between two such attributes of a single substance. Such a distinction is recognized by our inability to form a clear and distinct idea of the substance if we exclude it from it the idea of the attribute in question, or, alternatively, by our inability to perceive clearly the idea of one or the two attributes if we separate it from the other" (CSM I, p. 214).

[19] I chose here to use the term 'sovereignty' rather than 'power' for reasons that will come clear in Chapter Two. There is some scholarly debate about how the Cartesian God's sovereignty relates to power.

necessitated by anything. Descartes stresses the freedom that God possesses with regard to acting, stating that no essence is *necessarily* connected to the divine essence and he does state that God is the efficient and total cause of the truths. Here we get the most austere statement yet of God's power. A natural reading of this passage finds Descartes implying that God was free to make the impossible possible! Of course, that is not explicitly what Descartes says. He says that the degree of freedom that God possesses with regard to necessary truths is equal to the freedom God had to refrain from creating the world. Yet, the freedom that Descartes considers God to possess is not immediately clear; there are two different ways that Descartes could understand the nature of divine freedom, and depending on which sense he meant, we get radically different interpretations of this passage. In one sense, God is free in that there is no force outside of God that determines God's actions.[20] On the other interpretation, there exist infinitely many possibilities open to God, God selects from those.[21] Whether God was free to refrain from creating is unclear. Since the Cartesian God willed (and thus knew) from all eternity that these truths existed, it is unclear whether somehow prior, God *could* have willed otherwise. This exacerbates a worry present in the imagined dialogue from the first letter. Descartes suggests that God could have made the eternal truths different "if his will can change," yet God is free, immutable, and powerful beyond comprehension. I will return to the nature of God's freedom later in this chapter. For now it is worth noting that divine immutability, freedom and inconceivable power raise some obvious difficulties when trying to make sense of the doctrine of the creation of the eternal truths.

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[20] In the *Sixth Replies* Descartes says of God's will, "It is self contradictory to suppose that the will of God was not indifferent from eternity with respect to everything which has happened or will ever happen; for it is impossible to imagine that anything is thought of in the divine intellect as good or true, or worthy of belief or action or omission prior to the decision of the divine will to make it so" (CSM II, p. 291).

[21] In a letter to Mersenne 27 May, 1630, Descartes writes, "You ask also what necessitated God to create these truths; and I reply that he was free to make it not true that all the radii of the circle are equal – just as free as he was not to create the world" (CSMK, p. 25).

Another difficulty becomes apparent in this third letter to Mersenne: Descartes first speaks of eternal truths as if they are actually existing things, equating eternal truths to immutable essences. Descartes is not clear about what ontological status the eternal truths possess in his metaphysics. Given his commitment to the correspondence theory of truth,[22] it seems that God must have created the truth-makers of these truths. Descartes does not say much about truth-makers generally, but there is some evidence that the truth-makers for modal truths are the relations that hold between concepts. In the *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* (1629), Descartes locates the *necessity* or *contingency* of a truth squarely in the connection between the *concepts* themselves rather than in the objects themselves. In rule twelve he says,

> [T]he conjunction between these simple things is either necessary or contingent. The conjunction is necessary when one of them is somehow implied (albeit confusedly) in the concept of the other so that we cannot conceive of either of them distinctly if we judge them to be separate from each other. It is in this way that shape is conjoined with extension, motion with duration or time, etc., because we cannot conceive of a shape which is completely lacking in extension, or a motion wholly lacking in duration. Similarly, if I say that 4 and 3 make 7, the composition is a necessary one, for we do not have a distinct conception of the number 7 unless in a confused sort of way we include 3 and 4 in it […] The union between such things, however, is contingent when the relation conjoining them is not an inseparable one. This is the case when we say that a body is animate, that a man is dressed, etc. Again, there are many instances of things which are necessarily conjoined, even though most people count them as contingent, failing to notice the relation between them: for example the proposition, 'I am, therefore God exists', or 'I understand, therefore I have a mind distinct from my body.' Finally, we must note that very many necessary propositions, when converted, are contingent. Thus from the fact that I exist I may conclude with certainty that God exists, but from the fact that God exists I cannot legitimately assert that I too exist.[23]

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[22] See Descartes to Mersenne, 16, October 1639. "Of course it is possible to explain the meaning of the word to someone who does not know the language, and tell him that the word 'truth', in the strict sense, denotes the conformity of thought with its object but that when it is attributed to things outside of thought, it means only that they can be the objects of true thoughts, either ours or God's" (CSMK, p. 139).

[23] (CSM I, pp. 45-46).

This passage is consistent with an interpretation of Cartesian modality wherein the truth-makers for modal truths are merely the concepts located in finite minds, but taken alone this passage is not a smoking-gun for such an interpretation. The passage is also consistent with a view regarding modality wherein the conceptual relations provide finite minds with a *guide* to the necessity or possibility of some proposition. Regardless of how one reads this passage, these points of textual evidence suggest the fact that early in his career Descartes seems to have had a relatively radical view regarding modality and creation; that all modality depends on God's creation. Whether God could have made necessary truths other than they are is still an open question.

That Descartes stuck with his commitment to the radical creation doctrine is corroborated by some of the claims he makes in later works. For example, in the *Sixth Replies,* published in 1641, Descartes reiterates the sovereignty that God has over all creation. His statement here however is notably stronger than he previously stated. In fact, the progression in his thought seems to be located in his retraction of the dependence relation the eternal truths have on finite intellects that he implies in the *Rules*. He says,

> There is no need to ask what category of causality is applicable to the dependence of this goodness upon God, or to the dependence on him of other truths, both mathematical and metaphysical. For since the various kinds of cause were enumerated by thinkers who did not, perhaps, attend to this type of causality, it is hardly surprising that they gave no name to it. But in fact they did give it a name, for it can be called efficient causality, in the same sense that a king may be called the efficient cause of a law, although the law itself is not a thing which has physical existence, but is merely what they call a 'moral entity'. Again, there is no need to ask how God could have brought it about from eternity that it was not true that twice four make eight, and so on; for I admit that this is quite unintelligible to us. Yet on the other hand I understand, quite correctly, that there cannot be any class of entity that does not depend on God; I also understand that it would have been easy for God to ordain certain things such that we men cannot understand the possibility of being otherwise than they are. And therefore it would be irrational for us to doubt what we do understand correctly just because there is something which we do not understand and which, so far as we can see, there is no reason why we should understand. Hence we should not suppose that eternal truths 'depend on human intellect or on other existing things'; they depend on God

> alone, who, as the supreme legislator, has ordained them from eternity.[24]

This passage marks the first *published* statement of the creation doctrine. It is striking that this passage bares so many similarities to the original statement to Mersenne, eleven years earlier. This passage includes an elucidation of the analogy to the king and his laws—indeed Descartes here appears to equate the eternal truths to abstract laws which possess only 'moral existence.' Frustratingly, Descartes offers few hints as to how to make sense of the modal status of the eternal truths in this passage—again; he offers reason to think that God's power is beyond anything that finite minds can conceive, and that regardless of the fact that we can (plausibly?) consider the eternal truths as purely dependent on God's will, we ought not doubt the veracity of such beliefs when we consider them. It might be tempting at this point in time to think that Descartes's commitments in modality were becoming more ironed out—even if they are still frustrating and bizarre. After all, in his published work Descartes has now stated the creation doctrine, and suggested that the eternal truths are "moral entities," even if what that means is not entirely clear.

What is clear from this passage is that Descartes, at the time of publishing the *Meditations,* still maintained that everything depends for its existence on God's creative power.[25] Throughout the 1640's there seems to be a consistent commitment to the view that God's power entails that there is literally no limit to what God *could* have done. Despite the fact that this was a common theme in Descartes's previous discussions of God's power and his relation to the eternal truths, what is notable is the shift from the pure sovereignty that God possesses and the dependence that all being has on God to an explicit statement of

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[24] (CSM II, p. 294).

[25] A few pages earlier in the *Sixth Replies* Descartes implies that the existence of time is also wholly dependent on God's creative power. He says, "… On the contrary, it is because [God] willed to create the world in time that it is better this way; and it is because he willed that the three angles of a triangle should necessarily equal two right angles that this is true and cannot be otherwise." (CSM II, p. 291). See also: *First Replies* (CSM II, p. 78), *Second Replies* (CSM II, p. 116), and *Fourth Replies* (CSM II, p. 162).

divine voluntarism. Descartes spends some time trying to explain the scope of God's power in terms of divine, ultimate freedom. Divine freedom includes freedom *from* reasons for action. In a letter to Mesland, Descartes highlights God's freedom of indifference. He says,

> I turn to the difficulty of conceiving how God would have been acting freely and indifferently if he had made it false that the three angles of a triangle were equal to two right angles, or in general that contradictories could not be true together. It is easy to dispel this difficulty by considering that the power of God cannot have any limits, and that our mind is finite and so created as to be able to conceive as possible the things which God has wished to be in fact 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. The first 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. The second consideration assures us that even if this be true, we should not try to comprehend it, since our nature is incapable of doing so. And even if God has willed that some truths should be necessary, this does not mean that he willed them necessarily; for it is one thing to will that they be necessary, and quite another to will this necessarily, or to be necessitated to will it. 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 you suggest: 'that God might have brought it about that his creatures were independent of him'. But if we would know immensity of his power we should not put these thoughts before our minds, nor should we conceive any precedence or priority between his intellect and his will; for the idea which we have of God teaches us that there is in him only a single activity, entirely simple and entirely pure. This is well expressed by the words of St. Augustine: 'They are so because thou see'est them to be so'; because in God *seeing* and *willing* are one and the same thing.[26]

For Descartes, divine freedom is marked by supreme indifference, which seems to be grounded in his commitment to divine simplicity. After all, if God's attributes are strictly identical to one another, as he suggested earlier to Mersenne, then there cannot be any rational deliberation or reason within God. Indeed we see here the letter to Mesland in 1644, Descartes reiterates that God's will and the intellect are one and the same, thus precluding divine rational consideration prior to willing creation. Particularly striking in this passage is

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[26] Descartes to Mesland, 2, May 1644 (CSMK, p. 235).

that Descartes seems to be happy to call them necessary despite their status as purely dependent on the free and indifferent action of God. That is, Descartes takes pains to draw the distinction between the necessary status of a truth *because* God freely and indifferently willed it as such, and God's being necessitated (and thus not free) to will some truth.

Another important feature of this quotation is the way in which Descartes seems to want to assert the truth of a particularly strong claim regarding the creation of necessary truth, and the way in which he immediately walks back the claim. He states that God cannot have been determined to make contradictions impossible, *and* that God could have thus done the opposite. But in the very next line, Descartes takes it all back by stressing the inconceivability of God's power, unity, and impossible states of affairs. It is important to note why it is that Descartes retreats from the stronger claims. In this passage Descartes stresses that finite minds are capable of recognizing the truth of some propositions, and that those propositions entail the falsehood or impossibility of others. For instance, Descartes says that we can recognize that God is supremely powerful, that God is immutable, and perfectly simple. Together, these entail that God cannot have been necessitated, either by God's own intellect, or something external, to create in some particular way. Yet it is here that we run into the limits of our own understanding—what follows from the fact that God is not itself necessitated is inconceivable. This is certainly not the first time that Descartes has been a bit cagey about what finite beings can know, or should contemplate with regard to the issues in modality, but it is worth flagging this as part of a larger trend. Descartes is often understood to have held the more radical thesis that follows from the "first consideration," but it is important to note that he often immediately tempers his commitment. This quotation is no different.

Descartes's account of divine freedom plays an interesting and important role in his account of necessity and contingency, but for now I will only flag it as another point to be explored later. Ultimately I am trying to make sense of what necessity and possibility are supposed to be for Descartes, so for the time being, I will continue to survey the passages

where he discusses these themes. In the same year that Descartes wrote to Mesland highlighting divine freedom, Descartes returns to his previous sentiments regarding the dependence of the eternal truths on finite minds. For example in *Principles* I.14 (published in 1644), Descartes reiterates his concept containment thesis of necessity, this time both in terms of God's nature and the nature of a triangle. He says,

> In this one idea [the idea of God, which alone guarantees the existence of its object] the mind recognizes existence – not merely the possible and contingent existence *which belongs to the ideas of all other things which it distinctly perceives*, but utterly necessary and eternal existence. Now on the basis of its perception that, for example, it is necessarily contained in the idea of a triangle that its three angles should equal two right angles, *the mind is quite convinced* that a triangle does have three angles equaling two right angles. In the same way, simply on the basis of its perception that necessary and eternal existence is contained in the idea of a supremely perfect being, the mind must clearly conclude that the supreme being does exist.[27]

This passage is striking for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that Descartes explicitly says that possible and contingent existence belongs to the ideas of "all other things" that we distinctly perceive. Of course, he does follow up with a paradigm example of an eternal truth, and again suggests the concept containment account of necessity. Compare this sentiment with that expressed in *Principles* I.48, where he states that "all the objects of our perception we regard as things, or affections of things, or else as eternal truths which have no existence outside of our thought."[28] Again in *Principles* I.49 Descartes says that the proposition, 'nothing comes from nothing,' "is not regarded as a really existing thing, or even as a mode of a thing, but as an eternal truth which resides within our mind."[29] I noted above that Descartes is committed to the correspondence theory of truth and that this commitment is another piece of the puzzle in making sense of his theory of possibility and

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[27] (CSM I, p. 197-8) emphasis mine.

[28] (CSM I, p. 208).

[29] (CSM I, p. 209).

necessity. It is worth noting at this point that given this commitment, the very fact that these truths are clearly perceived entails that it must be the case that there is a truth-maker for eternal truths. Just what would count as a truth-maker for the truths of mathematics and logic is not at all clear and Descartes himself frequently talks about what *is true* without saying anything about what the truth-makers are. I will return to the discussion of possible truth-makers in Chapters Three and Four. For now, I will flag this as an interpretive issue worthy of consideration.

Late in Descartes's career we see him bring together many of the themes that I have been pointing to throughout the course of his thought. In 1648, Descartes discussed the status of the eternal truths with Arnauld,

> The difficulty in recognizing the impossibility of a vacuum seems to arise primarily because we do not sufficiently consider that nothing can have no properties; otherwise, seeing that there is true extension in the space we call empty, and consequently all the properties necessary for the nature of body, we would not say that it was wholly empty, that is, mere nothingness. Secondly, it arises because we have no recourse to the divine power: knowing this to be infinite, we attribute to it an effect without noticing that the effect involves a contradictory conception, that is, is inconceivable by us. But I do not think that we should ever say of anything that it cannot be brought about by God. For since every basis of truth and goodness depends on his omnipotence, I would not dare to say that God cannot make a mountain without a valley, or bring it about that 1 and 2 are not 3. I merely say that he has given me such a mind that I cannot conceive a mountain without a valley, or a sum of 1 and 2 which is not 3; such things involve a contradiction in my conception. I think the same should be said of space which is wholly empty, or of an extended piece of nothing, or of a limited universe; because no limit to the world can be imagined without its being understood that there is extension beyond it; and no barrel can be conceived to be so empty as to have inside it no extension, and therefore no body; for wherever extension is, there, of necessity, is body also.[30]

In this passage we see Descartes once again address the sovereignty and inconceivable power that God possesses; all truth *and* goodness depend entirely on God's power. This proclamation is difficult to parse, but is wholly consistent with Descartes's previous

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[30] Descartes to Arnauld, 29, July, 1648 (CSMK pp. 358-9).

statements, even if stated a bit more baldly than he had previously. We should also notice, this time in direct connection with God's power, that conceptual contradiction (in this case empty space or the rejection of arithmetical truth) is dependent on the kind of mind that we have been given by God. This sentiment can easily be interpreted as reiterating Descartes's early sentiment that the eternal truths are nothing over and above a feature of finite intellects. It is also worth noting that in this passage, as in many above, Descartes is cagey about asserting anything regarding what God is capable of doing. When stressing the inconceivability of God's power Descartes does not assert that God *actually can* make contradictions true, but rather that we "would not dare to say that God cannot make" contradictions true. The double negative in conjunction with the discussion of divine omnipotence and the consistency with which Descartes has asserted throughout his life, both publicly and in correspondence, that all things depend entirely on God's free act of creation together might be taken to imply that Descartes thinks that God *could* have made the necessary truths other than they in fact are. Yet, he does not actually assert that God could do so. In Chapter Two, I will explain that while reading this passage as an assertion of divine voluntarism is *a* natural interpretation, it is nevertheless not obviously the correct reading.

Only a fortnight prior to drafting this letter to Arnauld, during his *Conversation with Burman*, Descartes makes a few assertions which, on the face, seem inconsistent with what he maintained throughout his intellectual career. First, Descartes seems to imply that God creates a limit on what is divinely possible by the very act of creation. In the *Conversation* Descartes claims,

> 'For it is impossible to imagine that anything 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.'
>
> [Burman] But what of God's ideas of possible things? Surely these are prior to his will.
>
> [Descartes] These too depend on God, like everything else. His will is the cause not only of what is actual and to come, but also of what is

> possible and of the simple natures. There is nothing we can think of or ought to think of that should not be said to depend on God.
>
> [Burman] But does it not follow from this that God could have commanded a creature to hate him, and thereby made this a good thing to do?
>
> [Descartes] God could not now do this: but we simply do not know what he could have done. In any case, why should he not have been able to give this command to one of his creatures?[31]

Here we see the sovereignty theme arise once again. Descartes asserts, as he always has, that everything that exists depends for its existence on God's act of will, and that to ask what is possible for an omnipotent being *metaphysically* prior to creation is not even a sensible question. We should also note the return of the radical voluntarism with regard to goodness. Perhaps struck by the force of Descartes's claim regarding the dependence of possible reality and the nature of goodness on the divine will, Burman presses Descartes on what God could have done. It is at this point that we find Descartes's first indication that there is some limit on divine omnipotence—he suggests that God cannot *now* undo what has already been created. In as much as God has already created a standard of goodness, and has issued commands, he cannot change these laws. This passage might be considered an allusion to his earlier discussion of the immutability of the divine will and the discussion of the "king" laying down laws for his subjects. For as much as this passage seems to suggest that there is a real limit on God's power, that limit does seem to arrive on the scene *only after* God has freely determined what will be and prior to that determination, "we simply do not know what [God] could have done."

More troubling than this passage, however, is another claim Descartes makes in the *Conversation*; that God was necessitated to will what he did. This statement, of course, stands in direct contradiction to what he said in the letter to Mesland: that just because God wills

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31 *Conversation with Burman* (CSMK, p. 343).

some truth as necessary does not imply that God's will was necessitated. During the *Conversation* he said,

> Whatever is in God is not in reality separate from God himself; rather it is identical with God himself. Concerning the decrees of God which have already been enacted, it is clear that God is unalterable with regard to these, and, from the metaphysical point of view, it is impossible to conceive of the matter otherwise. […]
>
> From the metaphysical point of view, however, it is quite unintelligible that God should be anything but completely unalterable. It is irrelevant that the decrees could have been separated from God; indeed this should not really be asserted. For although God is completely indifferent with respect to all things, *he necessarily made the decrees he did*, since he necessarily willed what was best, even though it was of his own will that he did what was best. We should not make a separation here between the necessity and indifference that apply to God's decrees; *although his actions were completely indifferent, they were also completely necessary*. Then again, although we may conceive that the decrees could have been separated from God, this is merely a token procedure of our own reasoning: the distinction thus introduced between God himself and his decrees is a mental, not a real one. In reality the decrees could not have been separated from God: he is not prior to them or distinct from them, nor could he have existed without them. So it is clear enough how God accomplishes all things in a single act. But these matters are not to be grasped by our powers of reasoning, and we must never allow ourselves the indulgence of trying to subject the nature and operations of God to our reasoning…[32]

In this passage Descartes reiterates a number of doctrines that I have pointed out above: God is a purely simple being, a being whose commands cannot really be separated from his existence; in virtue of finite minds' capacities created beings should really not try to make sense of what God is or is capable of doing; divine immutability; and God is perfectly indifferent to the particular truths that God wills. We also see here an about face on the question regarding modality governing God's actions—that is, in this passage Descartes appears to equate divine immutability, when conjoined with simplicity, to the absolute necessity that God willed "what was best." That Descartes would suggest this at all is a marked change from what he maintained previously—in the 1644 letter to Mesland he

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[32] *Conversation with Burman* (CSMK, p. 348), emphasis mine.

asserted just the opposite of this view, and in the 1648 letter to Arnauld he explicitly cited God's free, indifferent act of creation as the sole ground of necessity. In the same letter, he also described that action as the ultimate ground of "goodness." That makes Descartes's pronouncement here that God is necessitated to will "what is best" either vacuously true (for if God's actions are what makes something good, then by definition God wills the "best") or a wholesale rejection of what seemed to be his view (that goodness is nothing but what God determines). If the passage means anything other than the vacuous reading, then we have good reason to down-play this passage as a mis-transcription by Burman of what Descartes said. Certainly Descartes does not offer a wholesale rejection of his own view.

It is in this passage that Descartes sounds the most like Spinoza. Descartes stresses that everything that is in God is actually identical with God. This identity relation evidently includes God's decrees, and Descartes is explicit that any attempt to distance these decrees from God is a mere token procedure of finite reasoning. What is unclear, however, is what counts as a "decree." If God's decrees include all of those things that God actually creates, which is everything, then what Descartes is here endorsing is effectively Spinozism. Another way of looking at the same worry is by stressing the immutability of God's will in conjunction with the identity between God and God's proclamations. If God has willed some event or series of events, and God is eternally unchanging, and every existing thing depends for its existence on God, then it follows that everything that God wills is also eternally unchanging. Since Descartes thinks that divine indifference is really no different than divine necessity, it thus follows that *everything* God creates is necessary. More directly, Spinozistic necessitarianism is also implied by the claim that God is necessitated to will what God does, as this means that any alternative creation is not possible; if God is necessitated to will some particular event or series of events, and everything depends for its existence on God's act, then it seems to follow that that thing, or series of things is itself necessary, and thus everything else is impossible.

Descartes's apparent Spinozism is odd for a number of reasons. Why would he state so baldly a commitment to such a heretical view so late in his life? Even if Descartes did not mean to commit himself to Spinozism, it is worth asking whether or not he is actually committed to necessitarian metaphysics. In the next section, I will lay out a method for how to handle these questions, and then I will follow by addressing the various themes that can be teased out of *all* of the passages I have so far discussed. In doing so, I hope to be able to lay the groundwork for a survey of the relevant interpretive literature, and set the stage for my own interpretation of Descartes's creation doctrine.

What to Do with Competing Evidence

It is tempting, when confronted with seemingly contradictory textual evidence to try to massage away one or more of these passages, or to conclude that Descartes was wrestling with some very difficult issues and struggled to reconcile views that are inconsistent. Such moves are, at this point in the interpretive game, unsatisfactory, but remain open to us. It is important to keep in mind that Descartes was a systematic thinker, and thus we should first see if we could make sense of what he did say. If there is a way to make sense of the passages in question, we should strive to do so. Even at this fundamental level, we can test the different readings by checking the interpretive moves against broader systematic implications that they might have on the Cartesian system. On this approach, we ought to consider his systematic commitments when trying to reconcile seemingly contradictory passages. Only if it turns out that every interpretation of the Cartesian creation doctrine results in irreparable damage to some other central tenet of his philosophical or scientific system should we fall back on the view that Descartes simply held an incoherent view. By stressing different themes present in the quotations above, very similar, yet importantly different view can be developed.

I will first address a focus on omnipotence, then I will turn to a focus on the necessity of God's nature, followed by divine simplicity and immutability, and finally I will

address what Descartes's insistence on the limitations of finite cognition means for the creation doctrine. Here I will only spell out the logical space open to Descartes interpreters. In chapter two, I will return to the logical space that I am here outlining and I will discuss the philosophers who fill that space. There I will also consider the problems and limitations present in each interpretation.

Divine Omnipotence and Sovereignty

One of the most apparent themes present in Descartes's discussion of the eternal truths is the power that God possesses and that in virtue of this power, all things that exist depend for their existence on God's will. If one were to stress this theme in Cartesian thought, there are two distinct ways to make sense of modality. The first is to take such claims at face value, that is, to maintain that Descartes thought that even the laws of logic and mathematics are contingent, or $(p)Mp$. The scope of the possibility operator here extends beyond that which is conceivable by finite minds, as the very issue at play here is the immensity of God's power. Descartes does not shy away from pointing out that God's power is beyond what finite minds can grasp, and if we take him seriously, then it is not a great leap to the view that God is the author of logic and mathematics along with finite beings. If we are to pay proper respect to the scope of divine omnipotence then there is good textual reason to think that even contradictions are not beyond God's power. After all, Descartes does not want to say that God cannot make contradictions or what finite minds call conceptual impossibilities true. Descartes does, however, still consider some truths necessary. The way to account for necessity on this view is to draw a distinction between absolute modality, the modality governing God (where there is no limit to the scope of possibility), and a finite modality, modality limited to the psychological make-up of finite minds. This is a view that I will call, "universal possibilism."[33]

[33] (Plantinga 1987). They have been commonly used in the literature on Descartes and the eternal truths, so I will follow suit and adopt them as well.

The central claim of universal possibilism is that God's power entails that there is no limit whatever to God's power—everything is possible, even that which appears to finite minds as impossible. Necessity is thus located only in the created minds of finite beings and is understood to consist in the inseparability relations (for "necessity") or the incompatibility relations (for "impossibility"). Of course, the relations between concepts innate to finite minds do not track any actual relations in the world on this view—everything is possible. Yet, the distinction between absolute and finite (or created) modality can be known (even if not completely grasped) by finite minds; absolute modality merely being the absolute possibility of everything, and created modality being the conceptual relations in finite minds. Such an interpretation, while being perhaps the closest to the letter of Descartes's statements regarding omnipotence and creation and requiring, on its face, very little extrapolation, actually requires enormous adjustments to other features of the Cartesian system. On this view, the project of the *Meditations* must be entirely rethought. The standard reading of the *Meditations* is as an autobiographical, first-person guidebook for helping one find foundational, *necessary* truth in order to ground certain knowledge of the world around us. Yet, if there is no such thing as *absolutely* necessary truth, then the project of the *Meditations* must be something other than exploring how to get to necessary truths about the world. Rather, the *Meditations* would be an exploration of the limits of finite cognition. What appears to be necessary is that which finite minds cannot help but affirm—for instance, that something cannot come from nothing—and what is impossible is only that that cannot be conceived—for instance, the radii of a circle being unequal. On the universal possibilist view, of course, everything really is possible, but finite beings cannot imagine everything that could actually be the case. Such a reading does have the virtue of being consistent with other themes that arise during Descartes's various correspondences. For example, universal possibilism ties in Descartes's discussion of the limits of finite cognition, and divine freedom.

There are obvious drawbacks to such an interpretation, however, and I will return to them more explicitly in Chapter Two. For now, it is worth noting one specific worry in order to set up the second interpretive strategy that stems from a focus on divine omnipotence. The worry concerns the traditional arguments for God's existence. Both arguments that Descartes offers in the *Meditations* for God's existence rely on some form of necessity. The *Third Meditation* causal argument relies on the necessity of the principle that for any effect, the cause *must* contain that effect. Furthermore, the proof supposedly proves God's *necessary* existence,

> By the word 'God' I understand a substance that is infinite, <eternal, immutable>, independent, supremely intelligent, supremely powerful, and which created both myself and everything else (if anything else there be) that exists. All these attributes are such that, the more carefully I concentrate on them, the less possible it seems that they could have originated from me alone. So from what has been said it must be the concluded that God necessarily exists.[34]

The *Fifth Meditation* argument relies on the premise that existence is *necessarily* contained in God's essence. In fact, in the course of laying out this argument, Descartes relies on a disanalogy between God's essence and a paradigm eternal truth,

> From the fact that I cannot think of a mountain without a valley, it does not follow that a mountain and a valley exist anywhere, but simply that a mountain and a valley, whether they exist or not, are mutually inseparable. But from the fact that I cannot think of God except as existing, it follows that existence is inseparable from God, and hence that he really exists. It is not that my thought makes it so, or imposes any necessity on any thing; on the contrary, it is the necessity of the thing itself, namely the existence of God, which determines my thinking in this respect. For I am not free to think of God without existence (that is, a supremely perfect being without a supreme perfection) as I am free to imagine a horse with or without wings.[35]

The theme that arises in both of these arguments for God's existence is the explicit limitation of the universal possibilist position—the very necessity of God's existence, it

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[34] *Third Meditation* (CSM II, p. 31).

[35] *Fifth Meditation* (CSM II, p. 46).

seems, cannot be reduced to a feature of finite cognition without doing serious damage to the Cartesian project. To put it more acutely, if the necessity of God's existence is located in finite minds, then Descartes is just wrong in the *Fifth Meditation* that necessity in God Itself is the cause of God's existence. That is, according the universal possibilist, God could make it the case that God both exists and does not exist; it is impossible for finite minds to make sense of this suggestion, but it is an implication of the view. That is to say, since everything is possible, even the status of God's essence is up for grabs. Still, the universal possibilist has an answer to this kind of worry that is, at least, internally consistent. She might say that it just seems to finite beings, when they think clearly, that God necessarily exists, and all that Descartes was really concerned about was what is most reasonable to believe—not truth.

God's Necessity and Omnipotence

There is another position that tries to allow for full-blown necessity, at least for God's essence, while still allowing necessity to be freely created. This position, I will call it "limited possibilism," tries to preserve Truth in Descartes's philosophy, and by doing so looks to avoid many of the more unsavory implications of the universal possibilist position. In much the same way that the universal possibilist will draw a distinction between absolute modality and created modality, the proponent of limited possibilism will argue that for Descartes there must be some set of truths (or states of affairs) the necessity of which even God cannot change. What truths are members of this set can be fleshed out in different ways, and will result in different interpretive strategies; while the interpretive views fall along a continuum, I will discuss two different ways in which one could be a limited possibilist. What sets the limited possibilist apart from the universal possibilist is not the distinction between absolute modality and created modality, but rather is the scope of what falls under God's creative power. Recall for the universal possibilist, for all propositions, *p*, *Mp*; all necessity is located in the psychological make-up of finite beings (as the relations that hold between innate concepts). For the limited possibilist, there are certain truths that are

absolutely necessary, some that are only contingently necessary (though this is still *real* necessity), and some that are just contingent.

One way to try to tease out this distinction is to employ iterated modal operators. Of course, contemporary systems of modal logic (e.g. S4, S5) were neither available to Descartes, nor do they properly map on to what Descartes could have had in mind. For our purposes, let the outer modal operator pick out the *absolute* modality (or that which governs God), and let the inner modal operator pick out the *created* modality (or that over which God has supreme control). Thus there are three distinct sets of truths: those that are necessarily necessary (LL_p), those that are only contingently necessary (ML_p), and those that are merely contingent (M_p). The truths found in the first set, those that are necessarily necessary, are at least those truths that concern God's essence or attributes.[36] In the second set, those that are only contingently necessary, one might include the laws of logic and conceptual truths. This is a convenient way to match both the sentiment Descartes expressed in the letter to Mesland,[37] and to pay heed to the inconceivable power Descartes attributes to God throughout his correspondences. By locating some of the eternal truths in the second set of truths, the limited possibilist of this stripe is able to make sense of the necessity of the eternal truths and the dependence that they have on God's will without having to sacrifice the traditional reading of one of Descartes's central texts.

Alternatively, the limited possibilist might take a more conservative approach and limit the scope of absolute and created necessities. A traditional theological view found in Descartes's predecessors is the view that God can create anything that is possible—where by

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[36] Here we must include God's existence, for working in a pre-Kantian framework, existence is almost certainly a predicate in Descartes's mind.

[37] Descartes to Mersenne 2 May, 1644, "And even if God has willed that some truths should be necessary, this does not mean that he willed them necessarily; for it is one thing to will that they be necessary, and quite another to will this necessarily, or to be necessitated to will it" (CSMK p. 235).

that what is meant here is logically possible. That God cannot create any contradictory state of affairs is not a mark against omnipotence because, the story goes, contradictions are non-beings; they do not pick out anything whatever. To say that God cannot create *a* thing that lacks being is not a limitation on divine omnipotence, rather it is a meaningless utterance. Indeed, since God can provide being to any non-contradictory state of affairs (anything that could meaningfully be conceived), there is no limit to God's omnipotence. The idea here is to locate the absolute necessity in the laws of logic; there is absolute impossibility and it is denoted by logical contradiction. God is limited by absolute impossibility, but only by absolute impossibility. On this reading, the scope of the created modality is found in a way quite similar to the way the universal possibilist finds it. On this reading, created modality is located in the connections between the concepts that populate finite minds. In this way, the limited possibilist can account for the necessity of conceptual truths (such as the relation between an uphill and a downhill) while still allowing God the authority to control a certain set of necessities. Finite minds can introspect and discover necessary connections between concepts, and note that certain things are inconceivable. Of course, since created modality is located in what amounts to something like a Kantian *a priori* view, created impossibility does not track absolute impossibility—that is, there is an asymmetrical relationship between finite conceivability and possibility. While it is the case on this view that conceivability entails absolute possibility because the limiting case of conceivability is logical possibility, but inconceivability does not entail absolute impossibility because God could have made the necessary connections between concepts other than they currently are, even if God cannot *now* do that.

This version of limited possibilism also finds some footing in the way that Descartes talks about God's creative power. After all, Descartes does not come out and say that God *actually could* have made contradictions true (though he does hint at it in the letter to Mersenne 2, May 1644), rather he is quite cagey about what finite beings should and should not *say* regarding what an omnipotent being can do. The reason that finite beings should not

say that God could have made contradictions true is not because such an utterance is false, but rather because such statements are confused and meaningless. Finite beings are created with a particular set of concepts that stand in determinate relations to one another. Since the content of those concepts is fixed, any claims about God's ability to make contradictions true or conceptual truths other than they are misuses language in such a way that the utterances merely lack meaningful content. Each word may individually have definite content that refers, and the sentence may have the structure of a meaningful utterance, but in all, the sentence is gibberish akin to the famed, "colorless green ideas sleep furiously."

Divine Simplicity and Immutability

Yet another theme present in the passages quoted above is that God's nature is entirely simple and unchanging. In the *Conversation*, Descartes says that God cannot *now* make it the case that it is a good thing for finite beings to hate God, and he cites the immutability of God's will as the reason for this. Also in the *Conversation*, Descartes stresses that God's decrees and attributes are actually identical with God, and that everything is created in one single action. These proclamations are in no way limited to the *Conversation*, however. In the *Sixth Replies*, Descartes implies that God exists outside of, and (explanatorily) prior to time, "…On the contrary, it is because [God] willed to create the world in time that it is better this way; and it is because he willed that the three angles of a triangle should necessarily equal two right angles that this is true and cannot be otherwise."[38] Descartes's commitment to God's existence outside of and prior to time implies a tidy way to make sense of the immutability of the divine will when coupled with DDS. If it is the case that Descartes maintains the absolute and radical simplicity of the divine whereby all things that exist are created in one supreme act, and God stands outside of time, then the fact that God's will *appears* to be unchanging follows from the fact that finite minds cannot but think temporally.

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[38] *Sixth Replies* (CSM II, p. 291).

That is, since God acted once, and that one act established the linear path of events, all of which are present to God even before they happen, then it would appear to finite minds embedded in time that God's will does not change. To put the point another way, a necessary condition for change is the passage of time. Since God does not exist in time, God's will is not the kind of thing that could change, thus it is, or at least appears to be immutable.

If God's simplicity and immutability are taken to be the fundamental commitments in Descartes's modal metaphysics, then the interpretive space is fairly open, depending on how one goes about interpreting a few related issues with regard to God's nature. On one hand, it is not hard to see how a radical commitment to the DDS, when coupled with the claim that everything that exists depends wholly for its existence on God's will could lead to a fully deterministic metaphysics. On this interpretive strategy, the iterated modalities put forth by the limited possibilist get collapsed and in doing so, we are left with two closely related views: *actualism* and *necessitarianism*. Both views posit that there is no alternate possibility, "to be is to exist, and to exist is to be actual."[39] The distinction between actualism and necessitarianism is tricky and we need not burden ourselves with it here. Instead, I would like to sketch a schematic argument that motivates both views.

The argument for both views is really quite straightforward. If all things depend for their existence on God's creative activity, then nothing exists without God having created it. All things depend for their existence on God's creative activity. There is nothing that exists without God's having created it. Everything that God creates, God creates with one act of the will (from DDS). It follows then, that everything that exists was created by one act of God's will. For anything else to exist, God must will that it exist, which would require either another act of the divine will, or a change in God's will. God's will is simple and immutable,

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[39] (Menzel 2014)

however, so nothing else can come to exist. If nothing else can come to be except by a change in an immutable will, then it is impossible that anything else can come to be. If alternate possibilities are impossible, then everything is necessary. Nothing other than what already is can come to be except by a change in God's will (which is immutable). Thus there is no such thing as genuine alternate possibilities, and thus everything that is, is necessarily so.

Such an argument sounds perfectly Cartesian, but at first blush it does not square neatly with many of the earlier passages. After all, the reason that the doctrine of the creation of the eternal truths is so complicated is Descartes's cageyness regarding the necessity of the eternal truths, and whether or not they could have been different. As early as 1630, however, when we first saw Descartes engage his imagined interlocutor regarding the immutability of the divine will, we come across the sentiment that God's immutability is tied importantly to the necessity of the eternal truths. Considerations of simplicity and immutability are present, even if not explicit in many of the passages that follow as well. Both of these themes serve to support both actualism and necessitarianism. Still, one important issue concerns God's freedom.

Descartes offers a univocal account of divine freedom throughout his thought, and it follows from his commitment to DDS. Since Descartes is committed to the view that there can be no distinction between God's attributes, God's freedom cannot be analyzed in terms of reasons for acting, or in terms of being compelled by any idea (as seems to be his view for finite beings[40]). If this were the account, then there would have to be at least a conceptual priority placed on the divine intellect over the divine will. Since Descartes is committed to the strict identity between divine attributes, the mark of divine freedom must be *indifference*. Descartes does not disappoint. In the 1644 letter to Mesland, Descartes

[40] Descartes's account of freedom in finite beings is the subject of Chapter Five.

highlights the supreme indifference that God shows by acting freely in creating. The sentiment is echoed in the *Conversation with Burman*, and again in the *Principles*. One of the most explicit statements of indifference as a mark of divine freedom appears in the *Sixth Replies* where Descartes writes,

> As for the freedom of the will, the way in which it exists in God is quite different from the way in which it exists in us. It is self-contradictory to suppose that the will of God was not indifferent from eternity with respect to everything that has happened or will ever happen; for it is impossible to imagine that anything is thought of in the divine intellect as good or true, or worthy of belief or action or omission, prior to the decision of the divine will to make it so.[41]

If one were to be swayed by the above argument and consider adopting either actualism or necessitarianism, one still has to determine how to properly understand divine indifference. It is quite tempting to read indifference as analogous to the experience finite beings have when faced with a total lack of reasons for choosing between diverse options. If the analogy holds, then since the Cartesian God is supremely powerful, it is natural to read the creation doctrine as meaning that there are literally infinitely many options open to God to create, and God is not pulled in any one direction more than any other. Once God does create there can be no alternate possibilities, however, because God's will is immutable.

Of course, if we consider the Cartesian commitment to divine simplicity, God cannot *consider* any option prior to creating it, for the very act of considering a possibility is identical with willing that it exist, understanding it to exist, and so on. Given that God is immutable, and that God acts only once, it seems that Descartes is committed to the existence of only one set of created states of affairs. After all, if God's will is unchanging, and God creates in an unequivocally simple act, then God's will does not change and the only possible reality is what has actually been created. To ask whether it was *possible* for God to create other than God in fact did does not make sense. For, if God is to have options,

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41 (CSM II, p. 291).

then those options must *exist* in some sense prior to God's simple act. Of course, Descartes is unambiguous in his commitment to the view that everything that exists, exists *only* because God has willed it to exist. Thus, to try to make sense of the view that God had genuine possibilities available *prior* to creating is incoherent. God's simplicity, sovereignty, and immutability trumps what seems to be a conceptual truth about indifference—viz. that there must be (in some robust sense) alternate possibilities from which to select a course of action.

In response to this line of argument, one might suggest that, given God's supreme power, it is possible that God created a series of Lewisian possible worlds that are causally isolated, and serve as possibilia within the Cartesian system. Given the constraints that Descartes unequivocally places on God's will, however, we might wonder just how much work such a move could do. First, if one were to try to go this route, we should ask in what sense they even count as possible and not actual. Given the simplicity of God's nature and the relatively austere ontology Descartes offers, it is unclear how God's willing them into existence could accomplish anything other than their actually existing. Furthermore, even if God's having created them *can* account for their status as possibles, given God's immutable nature, there really cannot be any sense in which God could change its mind about what should move from possible to actual. There needs to be some mechanism by which the possible could become actual, and it seems that the only way to do this would be to violate God's nature.

It is conceivable that Descartes was always committed to actualism or necessitarianism, but failed to realize it until later on in his life (see for example the highlighted passages in the *Conversation*). Perhaps Descartes was always committed to the view, but suspected that it would be politically unpopular, and thus decided to be somewhat cagey about his commitment to it. It is also conceivable that Descartes simply changed his mind, and came to embrace one of these views later in his career. Whatever story one tells regarding Descartes's intellectual development on this front, these interpretations certainly enjoy a fair amount of textual support, but these views do not account for everything.

The Limitations of Finite Cognition

The final theme present in Descartes's discussion of the putative necessity of the eternal truths is the role that finite cognition has on one's ability to understand, grasp, and make sense of the various themes considered above (with a special emphasis on divine sovereignty and omnipotence). While the limits of finite cognition is a theme present in both forms of possibilism and in the actualist/necessitarian position, it is not the primary theme driving any of those views; it rests in the background and is consistent with each of those interpretive strategies. However, if one were to make the cognitive limitations the focal point of an interpretation, what results is a view importantly different from those previously discussed. I call this view reductivism because the proponent of this view takes seriously the limited epistemic position finite minds find themselves in and when coupled with an epistemic humility, this results in the view that nothing can be meaningfully said about *absolute* modality.

The reductivist view is characterized by the rejection of the intelligibility of *absolute* modality; while it is clear that Descartes says a lot about modality, and he does seem to say a lot about what God *could* do, the reductivist will stress that since finite minds are limited there are a good number of things we are incapable of adequately understanding. The paradigmatic example of limitations imposed by finite cognitive capacities is one's ability to grasp God and God's power. Indeed the inability of finite minds to make sense of God's power is a recurring theme in the passages above, and throughout the rest of Descartes's corpus. In the *Preface to the Reader* (of the *Meditations*), Descartes writes,

> I will only make the general point that all the objections commonly tossed around by atheists to attack the existence of God invariably depend either on attributing human feelings to God or on arrogantly supposing our own minds to be so powerful and wise that we can attempt to grasp and set limits to what God should perform. So, provided only that we remember that our minds must be

> regarded as finite, while God is infinite and beyond our comprehension, such objections will not cause us any difficulty.[42]

In this passage we see an explicit statement of how the limitations finite minds possess prohibit them from fully grasping anything like *absolute* modality, but without any mention of the eternal truths. Descartes is also clear about his view that God is not the kind of being that possesses human affectations such as emotion or feelings. This strongly implies an impersonal being. Furthermore, in light of the strict identity between the supposed attributes that God does possess (sovereignty, omniscience, etc), the ability of finite minds to adequately conceive of such a being comes into question. Taken together these issues imply that there is less about God that finite beings comprehend than first appears; the reductivist maintains that we should reject any notion of absolute modality and keep to ideas that we can clearly and distinctly understand—the set of which God is decidedly *not* a member.

The reductivist does have *something* to say about modality, however. In contrast to the universal possibilist (who maintains that everything is absolutely possible, and necessity is merely psychological), the reductivist will maintain that there is no coherent notion of absolute modality but will assert that all modality is reduced to conceptual relations. As I noted above, such an interpretive strategy does enjoy some textual support—Descartes does seem to consider necessity to be something like an inseparability relation between concepts in finite minds.[43] Consider this passage from the *Second Replies*,

> 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, since I supposed it to contain only what, according to our clear and distinct perceptions, must belong to it; and hence it cannot conflict with our concepts. Alternatively, you may well be imagining some other kind of possibility which relates to the object itself; but unless this matches the first sort of possibility it can never be known by the human intellect, and so it does not so much

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[42] (CSM II, p. 8).

[43] See, for example, *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* (CSM I, p. 45-46).

> support a denial of God's nature and existence as serve to undermine every other item of human knowledge.[44]

In this passage, Descartes seems to support the view that modal claims are made true *by* the concepts innate to finite minds, and that to assert something beyond the conceptual relations is impossible unless it corresponds to something else that exists. On the reductivist view, modality just *is* (identical to) the relations that stand between concepts in finite minds, and to try to step beyond our own concepts results in merely false assertions. On this view, there is no way that things really are, modally speaking. If a finite being tries to step outside of her own conceptual framework to get at what is *really* necessary, not only is this impossible, but she must be confused—there is nothing beyond the conceptual relations. For example, contained in the finite mind's idea of God is *existence*. Since existence is *contained* in the idea, God necessarily exists. To suggest that God *could* have made Himself a contingent being is merely false because modality reduces to the relations between concepts. The reductive analysis of modality precludes even the senselessness of such a claim; since the idea of existence is inseparable from the idea of God, it is necessary that God exists, and thus to assert that God *could* fail to be a necessarily existing being is merely false. To put the view acutely: modality is just in the head, it ain't in the world.

Treating All of the Themes

By way of contrast to all of the aforementioned views, one might take a different approach—one that seeks to avoid the radical reinterpretation of the universal possibilist and that can still locate modality and necessity in the world. This is my view and I call it "theological mysterianism." I maintain that while finite minds recognize that modality is in some important way tied to the interrelations between the concepts that populate the minds, one need not insist on a reductive analysis. In this way, I think that we can track absolute modality, and eliminate the distinction between the created and actual. The theological

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[44] (CSM II, p. 107)

mysterian maintains that what can be known about possibility and necessity is importantly tied to the way that finite minds think, but this does not put finite minds in the appropriate epistemic position to know what makes true claims about modality (or for that matter, God's nature and relation to modality) *in all cases*. This view matches the Cartesian method employed throughout his works; we cannot clearly understand God's power or what follows therefrom, thus rather than make judgments about that which we don't understand, we should remain silent.[45] Still, those ideas that finite beings clearly and distinctly perceive are true, and thus are within the purview of the finite mind. Those truths that are actual, necessary and *some* that are possible are knowable as true by finite beings. In this way the theological mysterian can maintain the truth rule (that all ideas clearly and distinctly perceived are true), and need not abandon the idea that the actual world is knowable by finite beings. The theological mysterian approach also garners textual support from the cagey way that Descartes discusses God's ability to freely create the eternal truths. As I noted in my discussion of the limited possibilist position, Descartes rarely comes out and says that God really *could* have made the eternal truths different from what they actually are; instead he exclaims that, as finite minds, we ought not say at all what is possible for God. I see this as a sign reminding us that finite minds cannot adequately comprehend God's power or nature. Generally, we should not try to assert that which we do not understand. My view will also capture the things Descartes says about God and modality. For the universal possibilist and the reductivist, claims about God's power lead them in a direction that entails that modality is merely about finite minds. My view gets around this by stressing that the conceptual relations *inform* finite beings about modality, but what the considerations of God's power actually lead to is that we must be quiet about what kinds of things conform to those ideas—

[45] This is the method asserted negatively in the *First Meditation*, and is spelled out explicitly in the *Fourth Meditation*. I will return to this issue and explore it carefully in Chapters Three and Four.

we must accept the truth of clearly and distinctly understood modal claims, even though knowledge of the truth-maker eludes us.

The cognitive limitations of finite minds is a theme that is clearly at work in some of the previous interpretive strategies. According to the universal possibilist the entire project of the *Meditations* is a re-thinking of the nature of the Cartesian project in terms of the finite mind. Of course, the universal possibilist's view is characterized by the positive claim that literally anything is possible, even though infinitely many possibilities are inconceivable by finite minds. Yet finite minds can know that impossibilities are really possible even if they cannot grasp what this truth means. Alternatively, the limited possibilist view (in any form) still relies on a distinction between the absolute and created modality. The reductivist view implies that such a distinction is not one that can actually be made, for to make such a distinction is to go beyond that which can actually be said or adequately understood; modality just is created modality. Indeed, while the conservative limited possibilist may well rely on the Kantian *a priori* analogy to ground the necessity of certain eternal truths, this is really the only the similarity between the reductivist and the limited possibilist. The characteristic feature of the possibilisms, both limited and universal, is that one can coherently draw the distinction between what is possible in light of creation, and what is possible absolutely. The fundamental characteristic of reductivism is that the limitations that finite cognitive capacities possess preclude any sense being made of absolute modality. My view, theological mysterianism pays tribute to finite cognitive limitations, and pairs them with a proper Cartesian attitude toward what can be clearly understood. Together, these imply that when one clearly and distinctly understands that something is possible or necessary, that tracks the way things really are, but does not often get us to *how* it is true. Finite minds have access to the concepts that populate those minds, and are capable of discerning the relations between them; it is the relations between concepts that are a guide to what can be known about possibility and necessity.

From Conflicting Evidence to Interpretation: Reviewing the Logical Space

It is worthwhile at this point to stop and take stock of what I have worked out thus far. Emerging from Descartes's writing about the nature of possibility and necessity are roughly four themes, each of which can be stressed to varying degrees in an attempt to make sense of what he thought about modality. Corresponding to each of these themes is one of four classes of interpretive strategies. If one stresses God's power and sovereignty, she ends up in the camp that I have called universal possibilism. The basic idea behind universal possibilism is that all truths depend for their existence on God's will, and despite the apparent inconceivability of certain states of affairs or beings, they could nonetheless come to be should God decide to make them so. It is important to note that the universal possibilist is committed to there being a distinction between finite modality, or the modality that governs and limits finite minds and absolute modality, or the modality that governs God. The nature of finite possibility and impossibility maps onto what is conceivable for finite minds, while absolute modality just is universal possibility.

Importantly different from the universal possibilist position are the limited possibilist positions. This set of interpretive strategies is most easily derived from the necessity of God's nature coupled with omnipotence. Born out of a worry concerning the grounding of divine necessity in universal possibility, the limited possibilist seeks a more moderate view of divine omnipotence. I suggested that there are at least two variations on the limited possibilist position, the standard and the conservative limited possibilists. These two approaches are not intended to be exhaustive of the options for this strategy, as the basic idea is that there is a continuum of views regarding what falls under the scope of contingent (or created) necessity as opposed to absolute necessity. Indeed what separates the limited possibilist from the universal possibilist is the claim that there is, in some important sense, some set of truths (or states of affairs) that are absolutely necessary, i.e. necessary in such a way that even God could not make them other than they really are. No such set exists for

the universal possibilist; literally everything, whether conceivable or not, is within the purview of divine omnipotence.

If instead of focusing on omnipotence and sovereignty one were to shift her attention to divine immutability and divine simplicity, strikingly different views arise. By focusing on simplicity and immutability the idea that God *could* now change truths, or somehow make things different becomes hard to imagine. This is precisely the idea put forth by the actualist and the necessitarian. Because God is unchanging and all things depend for their existence on God, alternate possibility would have to be either created by God, and exist alongside of actual reality (a proposition that bares little to no systematic or textual support),[46] or simply not exist at all. It follows then, that all possibility is actual; there is no alternate possibility, *absolutely* speaking. What sets these views apart from all of the possibilists is, perhaps obviously, the rejection of the existence of alternate possibility.

What sets reductivism apart from actualism and necessitarianism is quite similar to what sets the interpretive strategies apart from the possibilisms. Both the actualist and the necessitarian maintain that absolute modality is knowable by finite minds. Created modality for both of these views collapses to something akin to a purely epistemic modality: that is, non-actual possibility is simply an artifact of finite minds. Everything that is possible is actual (or necessary), and so any appearance that something *could* have happened is a mere confusion. It is important to note, however, that according to both the actualist and the necessitarian, finite minds can come to recognize this fact; finite minds can know that *absolutely speaking,* everything has to happen as it does. The reductivist, as I noted above, maintains that the epistemic position afforded to finite minds entails that claims regarding absolute modality are beyond what can really be clearly and distinctly conceived. On the reductivist account, absolute modality is incoherent and all modality reduced to the

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[46] I will return to the issue of what alternate possibility could be in light of Cartesian metaphysics in Chapter Four.

connections between innate concepts. Thus to try to step beyond the conceivability-possibility relation is to utter something false.[47] Alternatively, the theological mysterian position (which I advocate) maintains that conceptual relations track absolute modality, but I want to limit what can be said or judged about modality to what can be clearly and distinctly perceived. That is, epistemic modesty requires that finite minds recognize the truth of some claims regarding absolute modality even though the truth-maker for those claims is beyond their grasp. Finite beings recognize that God's power is well beyond that which can be grasped, and as such, recognize that there are conformables that exist even though we know not what they are. Still, there are instances where Descartes maintains that finite beings *can* clearly and distinctly perceive the truth of certain possibility claims.

Conclusion

There are a number of competing strategies available to interpreters of Descartes regarding the nature of necessity and possibility, all of which enjoy a fair amount of textual and systematic evidence. I have surveyed the various interpretive strategies in this chapter and laid out the logical space. In the remainder of this work I intend to defend a version of the theological mysterian view that does not place a premium on any particular theme present in the quotations from Descartes. Rather I intend to incorporate, in a systematic way, all of the themes mentioned above. I will argue that such an interpretation eases some of the tensions that have often been attributed to Descartes's philosophical project. Having in this chapter explored the logical space open to interpreters of Descartes, I will turn in the next chapter to those interpreters who fill the logical space. I will consider the stability of these positions both textually and philosophically and then offer an argument for my own theological mysterianism.

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[47] Recall that the claims will end up being false rather than incoherent, because *all* modal terms will be analyzed in terms of the internal relations between concepts populating the finite mind.

CHAPTER TWO: CARTESIAN PHILOSOPHY ABHORS A VACUUM: FILLING THE LOGICAL SPACE

Introduction

Having now surveyed the logical space open to interpreters of Descartes's doctrine of the creation of the eternal truths, I will here turn to the arguments made by proponents of some of those views. Naturally, there are more proponents and arguments than I will be able to consider here. Instead, I will focus in this chapter on a critical examination of those commentators that I take to be paradigmatic proponents of the two views most relevant to my own view. I will address Harry Frankfurt's arguments for universal possibilism, Edwin Curley's arguments for limited possibilism, and Jonathan Bennett's arguments for reductivism. For now I will turn to Frankfurt's account of Cartesian modality.

Frankfurt's Universal Possibilism

As a reminder, the basic thesis of universal possibilism is that there is really no such thing as absolute necessity—there are no necessary states of affairs, no truths that could not have been different from what they are—because God is so powerful that nothing can exist without God having created it, and there is no limit to what God can create. Instead, the proponent of universal possibilism argues, *necessity* is purely a psychological phenomenon. There is, however, absolute possibility, and everything whether conceivable or not falls under this designation. Finite beings are constituted in such a way that they cannot *conceive* of certain states of affairs; we cannot help but assent to the truth of certain propositions not because it is absolutely impossible for these propositions to be other than they are, but rather because of the constitution of created minds. It is in Harry Frankfurt's influential piece, *Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths*[1] that we find what most scholars have

[1] (Frankfurt, Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths 1977).

interpreted as the paradigmatic statement of this view.[2] In what follows, I will first lay out Frankfurt's interpretation and then offer some reasons to think that his reading is not the correct reading of Cartesian modality.

One textual benefit that universal possibilism enjoys is the fact that on this interpretation, one can take literally *all* of the troubling passages in Descartes's writings at face value. For example, recall Descartes's original statement of the creation doctrine in his 1630 letter to Mersenne,

> You also ask what necessitated God to create these truths; and I reply that he was free to make it not true that all the radii of the circle are equal—just as free as he was not to create the world. And it is certain that these truths are no more necessarily attached to his essence than are other created things. You ask what God did in order to produce them. I reply that from all eternity he willed and understood them to be, and by that very fact he created them. Or, if you reserve the word created for the existence of things, that he established and made them. In God willing, understanding and creating are all the same thing without one being prior to the other even conceptually.[3]

At first gloss, Descartes seems to be implying that God could have made a conceptual truth about geometry other than it is now; that the essence of circularity is in no way connected to God's essence (of course, as I noted in chapter one, appearances can be deceptive. In this passage, Descartes does not actually advance any positive claim about what modal relation created beings bare to God's essence, only that *all* created beings are of the same status). The initial gloss is important, however, because Frankfurt advances this interpretation not merely by appealing to the face value of what Descartes wrote. Frankfurt begins from considerations of the influence that Scholastics such as Aquinas and Suarez may have had on

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[2] Lilli Alanen has recently argued that this view has been incorrectly attributed to Frankfurt, and reads something much closer to what I am calling 'conceptualism' into Frankfurt's paper. Regardless of whether Frankfurt intended to argue for universal possibilism, the view is highly influential and is oft attributed to Frankfurt. For our purposes, we will consider the standard interpretation of Frankfurt's view. See, (Alanen, Omnipotence, Modality and Conceivability 2010).

[3] Descartes to Mersenne, 27, May 1630 (CSMK p. 25).

Descartes. Frankfurt stresses Descartes's tacit criticism of their inability or unwillingness to commit to an appropriate account of the doctrine of divine simplicity (henceforth DDS). That Descartes took the DDS seriously is a theme that I addressed in Chapter One, and can be seen in passages such as the letter to Mersenne quoted above and in this letter to Mesland, "…nor should we conceive any precedence or priority between his intellect and his will; for the idea which we have of God teaches us that there is in him only a single activity, entirely simple and pure."[4]

During his discussion of Scholastic notions of possible essences and how they relate to DDS, Frankfurt points out that such essences have "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."[5] Aquinas and others maintained that God's essence is in part constituted by possible essences, some of which God creates, and some God does not. But it is precisely because Descartes disallows any real distinctions, temporal distinctions, or distinctions of priority between God's attributes—specifically the divine will and intellect—that there cannot be such essences. If Descartes's God conceives of an essence, God also knows, wills, and creates such an essence. Thus, Frankfurt suggests, Descartes saw any discussion of possible essences constituting the nature of God as an untenable doctrine that fundamentally mischaracterizes God's nature because it is inconsistent with DDS. That is, in order for there to be possible beings that exist in God's mind prior to having created actual beings, there must be a distinction of some kind (at least in priority) between God's intellect and God's will that grounds God's having chosen to actualize some subset of possible existents. In the letter to Mesland quoted above, Descartes states unequivocally that such distinctions of priority between God's will and intellect ought

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[4] Descartes to Mesland, 2, May 1644 (CSMK p. 235).

[5] (Frankfurt, Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths 1977) p. 39.

not be conceived. It is precisely this view of divine simplicity that leads Descartes to the view that divine freedom is founded in supreme indifference.[6] Yet, Frankfurt's discussion of the nature of divine simplicity and Descartes's commitment to the doctrine stops there. Somewhat perplexingly, Frankfurt never returns to this issue. As I will show, he is not the only commentator to introduce and then subsequently drop the issue of divine simplicity without giving it a thorough treatment.[7]

All of this does little to alleviate the seeming tension in Descartes's view, however. After all, Descartes does say that the eternal truths are "necessary."[8] If God freely creates the truths, and there is no such thing as absolute necessity (as Frankfurt suggests), then how does one make sense of these statements? The move Frankfurt suggests that Descartes makes is to turn the greatest difficulty facing him into the central thesis of the view:

> What is troublesome in this claim that God could have made contradictions true is, of course, understanding the "could."…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… 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.[9]

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[6] While Frankfurt does not offer a full discussion of DDS, he is presumably thinking of an argument along the following lines. If God's will is identical to God's intellect, then there can be no deliberation regarding essences. So there can be no reason for God to create some as actual essences, and others as possible. Even so, it is unclear what possible essences (constituting the divine nature) would even be—that is if they are part of God, then they must exist in some sense. But what would it mean for merely possible essences to exist in God? Since Descartes says that in God there exists only a single activity, it is unclear what possible existences would be. Possible essences would have to exist alongside actual essences, and it is not at all clear where these possible essences would fit into Cartesian ontology. Therefore, there cannot be a finite set of possible essences that constitutes the divine nature without rejecting DDS.

[7] I do not intend this to be a criticism. Divine Simplicity is a very broad and difficult issue and probably could not be adequately treated in the space of a short paper such as Frankfurt's. Still it is odd that Frankfurt would introduce the issue with such fanfare, and then abandon it without further mention.

[8] See, for example, *Sixth Replies* (CSM II 291), and *Principles* I.14, (CSM I 197-8).

[9] (Frankfurt, Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths 1977) p. 43.

Trying to make sense of Descartes's thesis is precisely the mistake that Frankfurt thinks commentators have made throughout the years—Descartes himself warns us that, given God's supreme power, we should not attempt to fully comprehend God. Frankfurt is aware that this itself seems problematic; if we cannot understand what it means for a being to be sufficiently powerful to make possible the logically impossible, then how can we assign any meaning at all to the claim that God is omnipotent? By way of a response to this difficulty, Frankfurt sketches a response that he thinks is open to Descartes: all necessity is found only in *finite* minds in virtue of their status as created beings. Frankfurt maintains that those "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 inherently in them."[10] Rather, any feeling of truth, or clarity and distinctness is simply an artifact of the way that humans have been created. So the claim regarding God's omnipotence seems only to mean that we cannot conceive of God except as being really, really powerful—the concepts of 'omnipotence' and 'God' are inseparably bound in our cognition. This approach enjoys some textual support—in the *Regulae*[11] and in *The Principles of Philosophy,*[12] Descartes says things that are suggestive of the view that *necessity*

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[10] (Frankfurt, Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths 1977) p. 45.

[11] In rule-twelve, of the *Regulae*, Descartes says, "[T]he conjunction between these simple things is either necessary or contingent. The conjunction is necessary when one of them is somehow implied (albeit confusedly) in the concept of the other so that we cannot conceive either of them distinctly if we judge them to be separate from each other…Similarly, if I say that 4 and 3 make 7, the composition is a necessary one, for we do not have a distinct conception of the number 7 unless in a confused sort of way we include 3 and 4 in it… This necessity applies not just to things which are perceivable by the senses but for others as well. If, for example, Socrates says that he doubts everything, it necessarily follows that he understands at least that he is doubting, and hence that he knows that something can be true or false, etc.; for there is a necessary connection between these facts and the nature of doubt." (CSM I, p. 45-6).

[12] In *Principles* I.14, Descartes writes, "In this one idea [the idea of God, which alone guarantees the existence of its object] the mind recognizes existence – not merely the possible and contingent existence which belongs to the ideas of all other things which it distinctly perceives, but utterly necessary and eternal existence. Now on the basis of its perception that, for example, it is necessarily contained in the idea of a triangle that its three angles should equal two right angles, *the*

and *contingency* (although he rarely uses the term 'contingent') should be understood in purely psychological terms.

Frankfurt is aware that his interpretation faces some resistance because it raises problems for standard interpretations of Descartes's epistemology and for his philosophical system generally. Descartes seems, on the standard interpretation, to be trying to set out the limits and scope of human knowledge in the *Meditations*. During the course of the text, Descartes relies on certainty as the standard of justification, and of course, he argues that we can be certain not only that God exists, but also that God is not a deceiver. If Frankfurt is right, however, that what we take to be conceptual or logical truths need not be true at all, then the project of the *Meditations* seems to be in trouble. In anticipation of these concerns, Frankfurt points to a number of passages where Descartes seems to suggest that while God *could* have made the eternal truths other than what they are, he has said nothing that entails that God *did* make them otherwise. That is to say that while the eternal truths, absolutely speaking, need not be true at all, the Cartesian project of knowledge through certainty is consistent with the absolute contingency of eternally true (yet ultimately contingent) truths. Still, Frankfurt argues, *all* that Descartes is trying to show with his famous proof of God's non-deceiving nature is that finite minds cannot conceive of God as a deceiver.

Frankfurt's account entails a radical re-interpretation of the aim of the *Meditations*; Frankfurt reads this text as "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."[13] To sum up the interpretive worry and strategy: on the standard interpretation of

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mind is quite convinced that a triangle does have three angles equaling two right angles. In the same way, simply on the basis of its perception that necessary and eternal existence is contained in the idea of a supremely perfect being, the mind must clearly conclude that the supreme being does exist." (CSM I, p. 197-8). Cf. *Second Replies* (CSM II, p. 107).

[13] (Frankfurt, Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths 1977) p. 52-3.

the *Meditations*, Descartes aims to set out the scope and limits of the knowledge finite beings can attain with regard to the world, and on Frankfurt's view Descartes cannot have such high aims—instead he must be aiming only to set out the scope and limits of the way in which finite minds *think* about the world.

While Frankfurt's reading of Descartes on the creation doctrine has gained considerable favor, it is not without its problems. Frankfurt has noted some difficulties that the view faces, and has offered potential responses that are open to interpreters who find universal possibilism compelling. To that end, Frankfurt has offered a re-interpretation of Descartes's *Meditations*, on the basis of the truth of the surprising conclusion that those truths that finite beings perceive as necessary "need not be truths at all." Of course, if Frankfurt is correct that what seem to be necessary truths may not be true at all, then there are some obvious problems that arise within the Cartesian system. As I noted in laying out the space for universal possibilism in Chapter One, Descartes's arguments for God's existence become even more suspect than they have traditionally been thought to be. To be sure, Frankfurt's interpretation is especially troubling to some scholars because of the implications that it carries for both the *Third* and *Fifth Meditation* proofs of God's existence and for the truth rule. If it is only true that we cannot *conceive* of God as a deceiver, but God may well be, then Descartes's entire enterprise is in trouble. That is, if it is impossible for finite beings to conceive of a square-circle, and finite beings cannot have any recourse to whether or not God is *absolutely* mischievous and created the impossible figure, then there is no way to guarantee that God is not deceiving finite beings, even while making such a thought inconceivable.

Worse for Frankfurt's view, however, is that the view may be entirely incoherent. David Cunning has recently argued that despite Frankfurt's attempts to save the view from the charge of incoherence, there is an internal inconsistency within Frankfurt's view. Cunning argues that on Frankfurt's position, there must be one truth the status of which not only are finite minds unable to doubt, but that *must* track the way reality is – that God is *in*

fact omnipotent. Yet, if our perception of God's omnipotence accurately tracks the way that God really is, then there seems to be no reason to deny that the other truths we intuit track the way reality is as well. Finite minds intuit, Descartes says, that God is immutable and eternal as well as omnipotent, and if these are features of God it is unclear just how it can be the case that God considers any possible states of affairs other than those that He does actually create. That God is omnipotent is the central claim driving universal possibilism—that God can do literally anything—but if those truths that *finite minds take to be necessary* "need not be truths at all," then why should a finite mind accept that God can do anything, including make true impossible states of affairs?[14] On his view there is no principle open to Frankfurt to ground the absolute necessity of God's omnipotence, and if the idea is that finite minds must merely *conceive* of God as 'omnipotent' (whatever that ends up meaning on this view), and God is actually not, then it is not clear what work Descartes's God can do for Cartesian philosophy. Perhaps as a result of these issues, some philosophers have argued that universal possibilism is not only a surprising thesis, but is not a view to which Descartes need be or is committed.

Lessons from the Failure of Universal Possibilism

Overall, Frankfurt's view is subject to irreparable difficulties, not the least of which is that the view is likely internally inconsistent. There are, however a number of points that Frankfurt has keyed in on that are important, and at least close to correct. First, Frankfurt noted the close connection between DDS and the nature of modality. I mentioned above that Frankfurt does not give the issue a thorough treatment, and that he is not alone in failing to do so. So credit Frankfurt with appropriately noting that any plausible account of the Cartesian creation doctrine will have to at least pay attention to the limits imposed by Descartes's acceptance of DDS.

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[14] (Cunning, Argument and Persuasion in Descartes's Meditations 2010).

Second, Frankfurt notices an important implication of the Cartesian understanding of DDS: divine freedom. I noted in the previous chapter that Descartes maintains that God was *free* when it came to creation. I also pointed out that Descartes suggests that divine freedom is notably different from the freedom of finite beings in that divine freedom is marked by total indifference.[15] The freedom of indifference that marks divine freedom can be cashed out in two different ways. It could mean (a) that God is not influenced or determined by any factors (which is neutral on the question of there being alternate possibilities prior to creation), or (b) that there exists infinitely many options open to God prior (in whatever sense) to creation, and God is not compelled toward any one more than any other. Frankfurt clearly supposes the latter to be the case, and maintains that (b) is entailed by a proper understanding of divine omnipotence. While I cite this as a point to be taken away from Frankfurt's reading, I do not think that this supposition is entirely warranted. Minimally, as I argued in Chapter One, something needs to be said regarding how it is that these infinitely many possibilities *exist* prior (in whatever sense) to God's act. To be sure, Frankfurt is right to draw our attention to the issue of divine simplicity, even if his treatment is found wanting.

Third is a worry closely connected to the items just listed. The way in which Frankfurt's view goes wrong is fundamental—the view requires that certain facts about the necessity of God's nature hold, but such truths cannot be *absolutely* necessary at all because

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[15] Recall, for example, what Descartes says in the *Sixth Replies*, "As for freedom of the will, the way in which it exists in God is quite different from the way in which it exists in us. It is self-contradictory to suppose that the will of God was not indifferent from eternity with respect to everything which has happened or will ever happen; for it is impossible to imagine that anything is thought of in the divine intellect as good or true, or worthy of belief or action or omission, prior to the decision of the divine will to make it so. […] Hence the indifference which belongs to human freedom is very different from that which belongs to divine freedom. The fact that the essences of things are said to be indivisible is not relevant here. For, firstly, no essence can belong univocally to both God and his creatures; and secondly, indifference does not belong to the essence of human freedom, since not only are we free when ignorance of what is right makes us indifferent, but we are also free – indeed at our freest – when a clear perception impels us to pursue some object" (CSM II, pp. 291-2).

there is no such thing as absolute necessity. Yet, if God is not omnipotent and is not a necessary being then the very motivation for universal possibilism is undermined. This is a very important point to note for two reasons. First, the centrality of God's nature to the project of Cartesian modal metaphysics is here highlighted. To be sure, any account of Cartesian modality is going to have to make sense of the necessity of God and God's attributes. That universal possibilism cannot do so without undermining the view itself serves as an important cautionary tale. Second is the effect that an interpretation has on the arguments that Descartes offers for God's existence. If, as the universal possibilist must assert, there is no such thing as absolute necessity, then the claims regarding God's necessary existence become quite odd indeed.[16]

These are all problems specific to Frankfurt's view as an interpretation—these represent problems specific to Frankfurt *qua* interpreter of Descartes. Yet there is one other difficulty that arises from Frankfurt's position. While Frankfurt recognizes the centrality of modal metaphysics to the rest of the Cartesian philosophical programme, he creates inconsistencies *for Descartes* when he tries to reconcile universal possibilism with the rest of the corpus. The kind of contortions necessary to make Frankfurt's reading match the rest of Descartes's commitments ultimately fails the test of internal coherence, but what underlies the project here is an important point. I argued in Chapter One that any attempt to make sense of Descartes's commitments on narrow issues needs to pass not only the test of internal coherence, but must also pass the test of systematic consistency. While Frankfurt's view required too much by way of re-interpreting the Cartesian corpus, his attention to the broader systematic issues is to be lauded. Moving forward, I want to pick up on what is valuable in Frankfurt's universal possibilism, but avoid the pitfalls that plague his view. With

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[16] This is one of the primary motivating factors for Curley's rejection of universal possibilism. (Curley 1884). I will return to Curley in the next section.

this in mind, I will now turn to another interpretive strategy that ultimately fails: limited possibilism.

Curley's Limited Possibilism

Curley begins his account of Descartes's creation doctrine by offering three systematic reasons that Descartes was not, and indeed *should* not be committed to universal possibilism. He says that Frankfurt's interpretation "is hard to reconcile with (i) Descartes's commitment to true and immutable natures in the ontological argument, (ii) [Descartes's] acknowledgment that we clearly and distinctly perceive certain truths to be necessary, and (iii) [Descartes's] (limited) use of an *a priori* method in physics."[17] In support of the first, Curley argues that Descartes's commitment to the "true, immutable, and eternal natures" being the kinds of things that may never have existed, or even been thought of shows that the *necessity* of their natures *cannot* come from our minds.[18] In support of the second reason, Curley points to Descartes's truth-rule—viz. whatever we clearly and distinctly perceive is *true*. This rule, when coupled with Descartes's commitment to the correspondence theory of truth[19] spells trouble for the claim that there simply is no necessity outside of human thought. As for the final concern, Curley points to an interesting passage in *Le Monde* where Descartes seems to group together fundamental laws of physics and eternal truths. Descartes writes:

> But I shall be content with telling you that apart from the three laws I have expounded, I do not wish to suppose any others but those which follow inevitably from the eternal truths on which mathematicians have usually based their most certain and evident

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[17] (Curley 1984) p. 574-5.

[18] To support this, Curley refers to a passage from the *Sixth Replies* where Descartes says, "… Hence we should not suppose that eternal truths 'depend on the human intellect or on other existing things'; they depend on God alone, who, as the supreme legislator, has ordained them from eternity" (CSM II, p. 294).

[19] See for example, Descartes to Mersenne, 16 October, 1639 (CSMK, p. 139).

> demonstrations – the truths, I say according to which God himself has taught us that he has arranged all things in number, weight and measure. The knowledge of these truths is so natural to our souls that we cannot but judge them infallible when we conceive them distinctly, nor doubt that if God had created many worlds, they would be as true in each of them as in this one. Thus those who are able to examine sufficiently the consequences of these truths and of our rules will be able to recognize effects by their causes. To express myself in scholastic terms, they will be able to have *a priori* demonstrations of everything that can be produced in this new world.[20]

This passage is particularly important to Curley's project not just because it provides "perhaps the most interesting systematic reason" to doubt Frankfurt's universal possibilism, but also because it provides *prima facie* evidence that when Descartes talks about the necessity of certain truths, he might mean something like what we mean today. Curley construes Descartes's mention of truth *across many worlds* created by God as the ground for necessity. "Even more interesting, perhaps, is the fact that Descartes here anticipates an idea usually credited to Leibniz, that necessary truths are those which are true in all possible worlds."[21]

It is here that Curley makes the move from the truths being described as "eternal" and God's will's being "immutable" to the *necessity* of the truths. For if Descartes had anticipated the Leibnizian idea that necessity is truth across all worlds, and since Descartes grouped the basic axioms of his *a priori* physics in with truths of mathematics, then it would not seem a stretch to understand that those truths Descartes understands as eternal are in a strong sense *necessary*. The necessity exists not in the constitution of finite minds, but in all worlds that God did or would create. It is at this point that we get a statement of Curley's position—that there are *necessary* truths, and at least some, perhaps all of them, are created. One issue that Curley sees as facing Descartes's discussion of the creation doctrine comes from the way in which Descartes discusses the *creation* of the eternal truths; Curley thinks that Descartes's use of temporal language is unfortunate and confuses the issue at hand.

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[20] (CSM I, p. 97).

[21] (Curley 1984) p. 573.

Temporal language seems to imply that there was a *time* before which the eternal truths were true. But this is simply not the case, "[w]hat God did, to create the eternal truths, was to will and understand them from all eternity."[22]

Just how that works is not something that Curley claims to understand; he mentions that given Descartes's apparent commitment to divine simplicity there is an important dis-analogy between an act of God and the actions of created beings. Curley further suggests that he is not even sure whether the doctrine is consistent and points to three potentially inconsistent claims that would seem to follow from this description of creation: (i) God created the world in time, (ii) God created the eternal truths from eternity, and (iii) God created all things by one perfectly simple act. Curley then writes the problem off as a consequence of his not understanding DDS and moves on to "exploit an analogy between" God's actions and those of men.[23]

That analogy has to do with the nature of willing—even though the will of created beings and God are quite different given divine simplicity,[24] one thing does seem common between them: if an agent *A* wills that *p*, then it is at least logically possible that *A* wills that ~*p*. Curley takes this to be a "general truth about acts of will."[25] Since Curley is unhappy with Descartes's use of temporal language, he introduces the machinery of contemporary

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[22] (Curley 1984) p. 579.

[23] I suspect that there is a way that these three theses are obviously inconsistent and one way in which the tension may be only apparent. There is a scope ambiguity in the first of the three propositions. The proposition expressed in (i) might be read as saying either (a) God exists in time, and created the world at some point in time, or (b) God created the world, and with it, time, eternal truths, etc. Explanatorily prior to God's singular act, nothing except for God existed; time itself is a creation dependent upon God's creative act. If we read (i) in the latter way, we run into issues with temporal language again, but at least the doctrine is not inconsistent—this also allows us to make sense of the peculiar claim (ii), which without differentiating existence 'in time' and God's existence, I fear, makes no sense whatever.

[24] Curley mentions the doctrine of divine simplicity in passing, but claims not to understand the view, and suggests that perhaps finite minds are not meant to properly understand it.

[25] (Curley 1984) p. 580.

modal logic to illustrate in the timeless present that we can capture Descartes's view by using iterated modalities. The basic idea seems to be that God can and does will certain truths *as necessary*, and as such it does not follow that there are no necessary truths; quite the contrary, there are necessary truths, those truths that God wills be *necessarily true*. But there is a difference between God's being *necessitated* to will something, and God's willing *that something be necessary*. Indeed Descartes is well aware of this distinction, he says, "Even if God has willed that some truths should be necessary, this does not mean that he willed them necessarily; for it is one thing to will that they be necessary, and quite another to will them necessarily, or to be necessitated to will them."[26] What Curley wants to say is that for Descartes's God, it is not that God is incapable of willing necessary truths, but rather that most necessary truths are not *necessarily necessary*. Or to put it another way, any proposition willed by God could be either necessary or contingent, depending on God's immutable will. One more way to put the same thesis is that every proposition is *possibly possible*. "'There is nothing epistemic about these 'mights.' We are not saying: 'These things *seem* necessary, but for all we know they might not *be* necessary' We are saying: 'These things *are* necessary, but there is nothing necessary about *that*.'"[27]

There is a further question here. Doesn't this approach seem like an *ad hoc* fix? Curley was looking to ground the apparent necessity of certain states of affairs, and he did so by stating that God created them as such, but that God didn't have to make them necessary. "Out of the frying pan and into the fire, you may say."[28] Indeed. Curley has not offered

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[26] Descartes to Mesland, 2 May, 1644 (CSMK, p. 235).

[27] (Curley 1984) p. 583. Curley introduces two axioms that he thinks best express Descartes's system, they are as follows:
(T_1) (x) ((Ex & -LEx) → (φ) (Lφx → -LLφx))

(T_2) (x) (LEx→ (φ) (Lφx → LLφx))

Where 'E' represents the one-place predicate "…exists".

[28] (Curley 1984) p. 577.

much by way of a ground for necessity. So from where does the necessity derive? "What is supposed to explain the necessity of those eternal truths God did create is his immutability."[29] But immutability alone is insufficient to ground necessity. Consider the following temporally indexed proposition, 'it was true that at 2:25 p.m. on August 15th, 2013, Kristopher Phillips sat at a café and worked on his dissertation'. It is true, and will continue to be true; i.e. it is immutably true. Few people, save perhaps necessitarians, would maintain that this proposition expresses a *necessary* truth.[30] Of course, for Descartes, everything that exists depends on God's will, so on this account the fact that I sat at a café at that time was willed from all eternity by God's immutable will. But if the immutability of God's will is the ground for necessity, then that would make my sitting at the café necessary (but not necessarily necessary). What could Curley mean when he says that immutability is the ground for necessity? Recall above that Curley argued that Descartes anticipated Leibniz's notion of possible worlds. It is here that we find the key to what Curley has in mind. There are certain truths that God would make true in all worlds that God creates and presumably those truths are *not* such truths as what individuals will do on certain days. But differentiating *in principle* those truths that are contingently necessary and those that are merely contingent is a difficult trick, and Curley does not offer much by way of a principle of individuation between contingently necessary and contingent states of affairs. As I noted in Chapter One, it is unclear just how far one can take the possible world analogy anyway. Recall that, given God's simplicity, it must be the case that God creates anything God considers. If this is the case, then possibilities must be creatures, and if there actually are alternate worlds, then they really exist. But given God's immutability, it is unclear how this can ground possibility at all.

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[29] (Curley 1984) p. 593.

[30] For a sustained criticism of immutability as a ground for necessity in Descartes, see (Kaufman 2005).

Related to this issue is another problem, one of which Curley is aware. Curley sees that his view is not on significantly better ground than Frankfurt's view; there is still the looming question about the status of the truths about God's nature. To be sure, the problem is a bit subtler for Curley's view but it is still there. Recall that on Frankfurt's account, there was one state of affairs that had to obtain to get the whole project moving—that God be omnipotent. Omnipotence is not much of a problem for Curley, as on his account God freely creates some truths as necessary and others as contingent There are, according to Descartes, certain truths about God's nature that are *necessary*. The most important of which is perhaps God's existence. Simply stated, there seems to be an open question about the necessity of God's attributes, does God will its own existence as necessary? Put another way, Curley has a problem when it comes to identifying which truths are *absolutely necessary* and which are merely *created as necessary*. Curley thinks that if we lean on Descartes's claim that God's existence is the "first and most eternal" truth[31], then we have a ready solution to the question at hand. Truths about God just are necessarily necessary, and truths about God's creations are either contingently necessary or simply contingent depending on how God creates them. Immutability, for Curley serves as a "higher-order" eternal truth, and serves to explain the "lower-order" necessity that exists in creation.

Of course, there are issues with this interpretation as well. Curley mentions a few himself, and I have already hinted at one as well. The solution that Curley offers for making sense of the necessity of contingently necessary truths is by locating the necessity in God's immutability, but as I mentioned above, and as Kaufmann argues, this is either too weak to capture any necessity at all, or it is too strong and commits Descartes to Spinozism.[32]

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[31] Descartes to Mersenne, 6 May 1630 (CSMK, p. 24).

[32] The latter horn of this dilemma is clearly not a problem for the actualist/necessitarian. Curley, however, wants to take seriously the claim that God's will is, in some straightforward sense, *free* to do otherwise. As such, this would be a quite unwelcome conclusion for him.

Indeed all truths are, for Descartes's God, created by God's act of will, and regardless of what God wills, it will be willed by his immutable will. It is here that making sense of how immutability grounds necessity without also making everything willed by God in some sense necessary becomes problematic.

More troubling is that there is something suspicious about the first step that Curley takes in his account; Curley admits early on that there are a number of dissimilarities between the way that God is constituted and the way that his creations are constituted, including the peculiar doctrine of divine simplicity, a doctrine that neither he nor Frankfurt claim to really understand or allow to play much of a role in their accounts. But despite Curley's insistence that the will of God be radically different from those of his creations (not the least of which follows from Descartes's insistence of the identity between God's will and intellect), he goes on to draw a "general truth about acts of will;" a truth which itself involves a modal operator. Curley claims that as a general truth, if some agent, *A* wills x then it is at least *logically possible* that *A* will ~x. But it is not clear just what status Curley is assigning, or is able to assign that use of logically possible. It seems that Curley wants to exempt certain truths from the contingency of their necessity—but those are only the truths about God and God's nature. This leaves the laws of logic open to being contingently necessary—i.e. they could have been different, despite their lower-order necessity. But, we might wonder, is God subsequently bound by His own creations? That is, if it is the case that *all* acts of willing imply the logical possibility of willing the opposite—then that is either a necessarily necessary truth that governs God's act of will as well as our own, or it is a contingently necessary truth that subsequently governs God. If it is the latter, then one wonders in what sense Descartes is committed at all to God's omnipotence.[33] In the former instance, we find a clear violation of the principle that individuates the necessarily necessary from the

[33] For a full discussion of the paradox of omnipotence, see (Mackie, Evil and Omnipotence 1955). See also, (Mackie, The Miracle of Theism 1990).

contingently necessary. To some extent, Curley is aware of this difficulty. He points out that his system cannot really account for states of affairs that involve both God *and* His creation.

> For example, I assume that Descartes will hold it to be a necessary truth that (a) God is more powerful than Adam. If we regard (a) as a truth about God, then (T_2) will proclaim it to be a necessarily necessary truth. But if we regard it as a truth about Adam, (T_1) will proclaim it to be a contingently necessary truth. This does not seem to be a satisfactory result.[34]

It certainly doesn't. And the limited possibilist account is made all the worse when we consider the issues I mentioned above. Perhaps this is an issue with the use of contemporary modal logic—it seems likely that such anachronism just fails to capture whatever it is that Descartes took himself to be doing.

Along this line of thought, we find another concern facing Curley's interpretation. Curley maintains that his use of contemporary modal logic is the "best way" to interpret Descartes's modal intuitions. Of course, the addition of these axioms to the T system may end up being logically inconsistent and since Curley is not a logician by trade, he is not sure whether or not the outcome is coherent. Curley is not too concerned should it turn out that this is not a fully consistent account because after all, this is Descartes's view, not Curley's. Of course, there is a time and place for this conclusion, but if the problem turns out to be that the "best interpretation" does not accomplish what Curley thinks it does, perhaps it is in fact *not* the best interpretation. In a follow-up to Curley's paper, James Van Cleve utilizes the modal machinery that Curley lays out to illustrate that what his view actually commits Descartes to is not in fact the limited possibilism that Curley seeks, but rather the Universal possibilism that he is trying to avoid.[35]

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[34] (Curley 1984) p. 597.

[35] See (Van Cleve 1994). C.f. (Plantinga 1980) where he uses iterated modalities to argue that Descartes *must* be committed to universal possibilism.

Lessons from the Failure of Limited Possibilism

Curley's view involves a lot of complicated machinery in an attempt to preserve both the distinction between absolute and created modality, and some sense in which created necessity is still *actually necessary*. If Van Cleve is correct, all of that work is for naught. Even if Van Cleve is wrong that Curley's view commits Descartes to universal possibilism, Curley's view suffers from substantial difficulties both internal to the interpretation and systematically. Still, there are some key features of Curley's limited possibilism that are worth taking away. The most obvious take-away is that Curley is right to try to preserve absolute necessity. Where he is mistaken is in trying to keep a strict separation between created and absolute modality. The system that Curley tries to introduce matches the sentential structure of what Descartes says at times regarding necessity, but under scrutiny the view falls apart. I suggested in Chapter One that we can preserve absolute modality without having to contort ourselves if we merely give up the distinction between created and absolute modality. That is, there just is absolute modality, it is the truth-makers that finite beings cannot understand. I will return to this issue below when I sketch theological mysterianism.

Second, Curley is absolutely correct to point out that Descartes's commitment to the correspondence theory of truth raises problems for the conceptualist account modality. I will return to this criticism below, as it applies to both Frankfurt's universal possibilism and Bennett's reductivism. I will flesh out the implications of this insight in Chapter Three. For now it is worth noting that Curley has keyed in on a crucial piece of the puzzle by noting that for modal claims to be true, there must be a truth-maker, and that the conceptual approach is not going to cut it.

Third, it is worth noting that while Curley may have been expressing personal frustration regarding the comprehensibility of the DDS, he is almost right to point out that it may not be the kind of thing that finite minds are supposed to understand. It is my view that there is nothing especially difficult in *understanding that* God's attributes are all identical to one another. Rather what is difficult, and on my view impossible, is for the finite mind to *grasp*

the truth-maker for such a unity, and thus recognize all of the implications that God's supreme simplicity entails. Since finite beings cannot grasp the truth-maker, let alone see the implications, it is best to recognize that knowing the truth is enough.

In many ways, Curley's attempt to preserve the created/absolute distinction leads him to the difficulties his view faces. If, however, we can construct a view that does not project onto God's nature the limitations of finite beings, we will be in a far better position to make sense of what Descartes is committed to in terms of modality. Where Frankfurt and Curley try to maintain the distinction between created and absolute modality, Bennett's reductivism serves to reduce all modality to the purely conceptual. That is, reductivism simply eliminates the absolute in favor of the created and asserts that created modality is all that there is. To that view I will now turn.

Bennett's Reductivism

The view that I have labeled reductivism is marked by the commitment to a conceptual reduction of modality to relations between the concepts that populate finite minds. Conceivability does not *track* absolute possibility, nor does inconceivability track absolute impossibility. There is no distinction between what is true for the angels and God about modality and what is true from the perspective of finite creatures because at the end of the day modality is nothing over and above the relation between finite concepts. Jonathan Bennett develops and defends this view in "Descartes's Theory of Modality."[36] Like Frankfurt, and Curley, Bennett makes a number of important points. At the end of the day Bennett's view suffers from some of the same worries that befell Frankfurt. I will here lay out Bennett's view, and then point to the ways in which his view suffers from the same problems that ultimately make Frankfurt's view implausible. I will then offer what I take to be the important points, both good and bad, from Bennett's view.

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[36] (Bennett 1994).

As evidence that Descartes will not allow finite minds to comprehend what God can and cannot do, consider this passage from the preface to the *Meditations*,

> I will only make the general point that all the objections commonly tossed around by atheists to attack the existence of God invariably depend either on attributing human feelings to God or on arrogantly supposing our own minds to be so powerful and wise that we can attempt to grasp and set limits to what God can or should perform. So, provided that we remember that our minds must be regarded as finite, while God is infinite and beyond our comprehension, such objections will not cause us any difficulty.[37]

Since Descartes, at least here, unequivocally states that we ought not try to fully understand what God is capable of Bennett offers an alternative that neither purports to limit God's power to have created the eternal truths differently, nor does it claim that finite minds can coherently recognize that this class of truths is somehow contingent. Rather, he simply claims that we ought not even try to make sense of God's power, as it is simply beyond us. Since God's power is beyond us, we "should not put those thoughts before our minds."[38]

Bennett thinks that Descartes may be somewhat schizophrenic with regard to how we ought to understand the nature of truth – claiming that Descartes maintains a subjectivist/pragmatist account of truth in *The Meditations*, and an objectivist/realist strand elsewhere – and that this schizophrenia best explains how Descartes thought of iterated modalities. We cannot divorce ourselves from our mental constitution, and all modality is indexed to what we can conceive. Necessity, impossibility, and contingency are all rigidly designated concepts that pick out some feature of the constitution of finite minds; specifically the relations between concepts that obtain as a result of the way finite minds are created. It is simply a matter of convention that finite beings take the conceptual connections that define modality as tracking the way the world *really* is. Since finite beings cannot step outside of their conceptual apparatus to evaluate the veracity of seemingly

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[37] (CSM II, p. 8).

[38] Descartes to Mesland, 2 May 1644, (CSMK p. 233).

necessary truths, they simply accept, as a matter of pragmatics, that the conceptual relations correspond to the facts of the world. No evidence that modality is as finite minds take it to be is possible on Bennett's view. He is highlighting that we cannot step outside of our own perspective.

Bennett begins his discussion of Descartes's creation doctrine by trying to steer the discussion away from God's *omnipotence* and instead focuses on God's *greatness*. It is this distinction that drives Bennett's view and it's a relatively straight-forward distinction: *omnipotence* is a term that we use to describe a being of complete power—a being capable of doing anything; *greatness*, on the other hand, has to do with God's relation to created things—there is nothing that exists outside of God. Bennett thinks that one of the most problematic mistakes facing the discussion of Descartes's creation doctrine is the confusion of these two ways of discussing God's relation to reality and truth. In order to make a case for this distinction's viability, Bennett points to the fact that Descartes rarely uses the term "omnipotent" in any passages where he describes God's *voluntarism*, and in one of the few passages where he does explicitly mention "omnipotence"[39] the use of this term "is driven by the thought of dependence, not that of omnipotence in the sense of the ability to do anything."[40] The difference, Bennett thinks, is made most acute by pointing out that in the

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[39] The passage that Bennett cites is from the letter to Arnauld, 29 July 1648 where Descartes says, "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 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." This passage is important to Bennett for two reasons: first is that it is an instance where Descartes does *say* that God is omnipotent, but that does not explicitly claim that God *can* do other than He did, and the second reason is that Descartes here mentions not just that truth but also *goodness* depends on God's will (CSMK, p. 358).

[40] Bennett (1994), p. 643.

letter to Arnuald as well as in the *Sixth Replies*[41] Descartes runs together considerations of the modal status and the moral status of certain states of affairs. Bennett does not think that it makes any sense to suggest that omnipotence has a direct tie to the ability to legislate ethical truths; if God's creating the world in time *makes* it both true *and* good that the world is created in time, then the latter half of that claim is less obviously tied to God's ability to *do* anything. What is clear is that the goodness of the world's existing in time does not exist independent of God—that goodness and truth are solely dependent on God's free act. That is, since all things (truth included, however we cash this out) depend for their existence on God, and the "moral half has no direct link with 'God can do anything'… the same holds for the logical half."[42] This is clearly just the Euthyphro dilemma, and Descartes is trying to wrestle with the implications of the view that there is no independent standard.

The distinction between God's omnipotence and the dependence of all things is central to Bennett's interpretation. Bennett advocates for the interesting claim that modality exists only as the relation between our ideas and since our minds could have been constituted differently, we ought not claim that necessary truths are necessarily necessary. The important point to take away, however, from the discussion about the dependence of all things is not that our ability to conceive of differently-created-minds in any way tells finite minds what God can or cannot do, but rather that the way that finite minds cognize is dependent upon God's act. *Qua* finite mind, Descartes should be taken seriously when he says that one should not try to *grasp* God's abilities. By claiming that God *could* have created the eternal truths differently (read: God is omnipotent), Bennett argues, a finite mind illicitly and "implicitly claims to grasp what God can do."[43] Of course, there are a number of

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[41] "… On the contrary, it is because he willed to create the world in time that it is better this way; and it is because he willed that the three angles of a triangle should necessarily equal two right angles that this is true and cannot be otherwise." (CSM II, p. 291).

[42] (Bennett 1994) p. 644.

[43] Ibid.

passages where Descartes precludes this as a genuine possibility—in the passage from the preface to the *Meditation*s we saw an explicit prohibition of trying to grasp God, and the sentiment is echoed throughout the *First Replies* where Descartes says, "let me say first of all that the infinite, *qua* infinite, can in no way be grasped… I apply the term 'infinite,' in the strict sense, only to that in which no limits of any kind can be found; and in this sense God alone is infinite."[44]

This, Bennett thinks could suffice to explain Descartes's theory of modality; the story would look something like this: God is sovereign which means that everything in existence (including truth, goodness, logic, and the relations between ideas) depends only and entirely on a single free act of God. Since human minds are finite, and God is in a strict sense 'infinite,' it follows that our cognitive faculties fall short of being completely able to *grasp* the entirety of God's nature. Part of God's nature is to exist conceptually prior to the rules that govern the relations between the ideas that we have, for those rules are themselves created beings and depend entirely on God. Thus, we cannot make any claim about what, if any, rules govern God's supreme freedom. That is, to try to assert, as Frankfurt did, that indifference entails an infinite number of alternate possibilities is to judge as true that which finite minds cannot comprehend. Instead, Bennett is advocating for the view that indifference must mean only that God is not influenced by anything outside of Him—but to make any further claim about what follows is to make the same mistake as Frankfurt, and so Bennett thinks that we cannot do so.

This is a plausible story for Descartes, Bennett thinks, but it is not the whole story. Indeed this brief account suggests an independent analysis of modality—one that relies on the relationship between the ability or inability a finite mind possesses to conceive of some state of affairs and the modal status that state-of-affairs actually has. Rather than appealing

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[44] (CSM II, p. 81). Cf. *Second Replies* (CSM II, p. 100, and 108), *Fifth Replies* (CSM II, p. 253), and the *Appendix to the Fifth Replies* (CSM II, p. 273-4).

to theological tenets, Descartes can offer an account of modality that is agnostic to any particular theology—this is a virtue, Bennett may well think, because Descartes tries at various times to draw a hard distinction between the scope of philosophy and the questions that are appropriately understood as "theological."[45] Bennett thinks that the same conclusion regarding modality is reached without appeal to God or the distinction between omnipotence and greatness and thus that the view "might be favored by an atheist."

There is a great deal of literature on Descartes's commitment to the principle that "conceivability entails possibility," and the received view seems to be that it is something like this principle that Descartes utilizes in his famous proof for the independence of mind and body.[46] While I will not here weigh in on whether or not this is the appropriate reading of Descartes's argument for substance dualism, I will point out that Bennett thinks that Descartes endorsed something pretty close to this—that there is a close connection between the ability or inability finite beings possess with regard to conceiving of something and its actually being possible or impossible.[47] But what exactly does Bennett take the relationship to be? Citing the example that Descartes uses of God's ability to create an uphill without a downhill,[48] Bennett offers two interpretations of the relationship between "(i) a thesis relating necessary truths to God [and] (ii) a thesis relating them to us."[49]

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[45] See Descartes to Mersenne, 27, May 1630 (CSMK p. 26), and the final section of the *Fourth Replies*, (CSM II, p. 172-8).

[46] See for example, (Balog 1999). See also (Gendler and Hawthorne 2002).

[47] I will return to the conceivability-possibility connection with regard to the issue of mind-body dualism in Chapter Four.

[48] Here Bennett tips his hand a bit. The passage that he is referring to is from the 1648 letter to Arnauld (CSMK pp. 358-9), where Descartes does not explicitly endorse the view that God *can* make an uphill without a downhill, rather he asserts only that he "would dare not say that God cannot make a mountain without a valley…" As noted in Chapter One, Bennett's gloss on this passage is not unnatural, but it is also not obviously the right one either.

[49] (Bennett 1994) p. 645.

The first relationship, Bennett thinks is disastrous. If we take (i) to imply, "God could create an uphill without a downhill" and (ii) implies, "finite minds wrongly think that there cannot be an uphill without a downhill because that is a state of affairs that is inconceivable," then the account of modality is remarkably similar to Frankfurt's universal possibilism, and is thus incoherent. Number (i) claims that that there is only one modality, absolute modality. We think that there are more, and we think that we can say something about both absolute modality and created modality. This explains the voluntarist passages in Descartes, but "at the prohibitive price of [turning] voluntarism into a rogue elephant crashing destructively through the rest of Descartes's work."[50] Presumably, what Bennett has in mind here is something along the lines of Geach's point: trying to make sense of God's omnipotence by claiming that God can do what we take to be impossible is an exercise in futility.[51] We do not have the conceptual resources to describe *meaningfully* what it would mean for a contradictory state-of-affairs to obtain. I've mentioned the problems with universal possibilism above, and we need not rehearse them here again, and it is clear that the coherence of the view is at least of some concern. It is, presumably, this that gives Bennett reason to consider another interpretation.

If we interpret (i) as a claim about the way the world actually is with regard to the creation of uphills and downhills—i.e. God made uphills such that they are always paired with downhills—*and* refrain from trying to say what God *could have done*, then we can understand (ii) as an epistemological claim about modality. To put it another way, God legislated rules that govern the world, and then created finite minds with limits on what they can conceive of *as a guide* to the way the world is. Recall that on Bennett's view, there really is no such thing as the way modality *really* is, there is just creation, and modality consists in the

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[50] Ibid.

[51] (Geach 1973).

relations between innate concepts. On Bennett's view, necessary truths are just true, what affords them a special modal status is the relation that it bears to other concepts finite minds possess rather than something in the world. This is much more promising in a number of ways. First, it is a coherent position. Second, and more interestingly, it is both sensitive to the negative phrasing that Descartes uses when he discusses our perceptions of God's power and freedom, and the passages where Descartes seems to rely on God as a non-deceiving being, thus avoiding the unfortunate consequence that we saw with the universal possibilism—viz. that this doctrine becomes "a rogue elephant." This interpretive strategy strikes me as the right one. By locating a correspondence between facts that actually obtain and the way that the concepts in finite minds are structured, we can account for Descartes's commitments regarding truth, and many of the more troubling details of the Cartesian system without having to resort to weird distinctions between levels of modality (as the limited possibilist must) or inconceivable possibilities (as the universal possibilist must). However, the devil, as they say, is in the details.

Bennett fleshes out the epistemological modality with what he calls a "conceptual analysis of modal concepts." This analysis amounts to a reduction of absolute modality to a claim about the nature of finite minds—"*p* is *absolutely* impossible," just means that no human can coherently entertain the proposition, '*p*' while clearly and distinctly understanding the content of *p*. The modal term in this analysis might provide one a momentary pause, after all this is supposed to be an analysis of *modality*; any analysis of modality that contains a modal operator is immediately suspicious. Notice, however that here we have two different senses of possibility at work: one is an *absolute* sense (which is being analyzed) and the other is a nomological sense which comes as the analysis. That is, any claim that is purportedly about "absolute necessity" is reduced to a claim about what is *causally* possible given the conceptual resources present to human cognition. The reduction is from absolute modality to conceptual modality. To put the reduction another way, claims about absolute necessity are nothing over and above claims about the connections between the concepts placed in

finite minds. Some concepts are related in such a way that they are incompatible with one another (such as 'square' and 'circle'), and some are related in such a way that one contains the other (such as 'uphill' and 'downhill'). The reduction is particularly powerful, as finite minds cannot ever step outside of their own minds/concepts to consider anything above or beyond them. Thus the most that finite minds can meaningfully claim is that *if* there is some kind of further modality that governs the divine, then it is well beyond anything that finite minds can hold before themselves. As such it follows that any positive claims made about what God can or cannot do, beyond what already exists, are doomed to be false. The reason that such claims will be *false* (and not mere nonsense) follows from the reductive analysis of modal concepts. Since possibility is rigidly designated to the compatibility of concepts in finite minds, to claim that God *could* have made 2 + 2 anything other than 4 just is false. Since concepts are created and depend upon God, finite beings cannot know whether or not God is limited by them in the way that finite minds are.[52]

Bennett relies on one further piece of textual evidence that is quite effective. Descartes says in the *Second Replies* that the only kind of "possibility" about which one can coherently converse is one that relates to the minds of finite creatures and "any other kind of possibility which relates to the object itself […] unless [it] matches the first sort of possibility it can never be known by the human intellect."[53] This is a particularly compelling passage. It provides striking evidence of Bennett's account. His interpretation also easily handles all of the passages where Descartes speaks negatively about what God can do, and more easily handles the odd passage in the 1644 letter to Mesland where Descartes comes close to saying that God could have "done the opposite" of making contradictories contradictory (though it

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[52] The ability to conceive of God and to grasp God is an important issue, and I will return to it in Chapter Three. For now, it should suffice to point out that Descartes consistently maintained that finite beings do not fully grasp God's nature.

[53] (CSM II, p. 107).

is a "hot potato" even for Bennett; I will return to that later). Bennett's interpretation does not only have textual support however, for as I noted above, Bennett was concerned with the effect that Descartes's modal metaphysics would have on the rest of his system—*if* this is Descartes's understanding of modality then,

> Descartes's analysis of modality also leads to voluntarism. Given that all modal truths are at bottom truths about what we can conceive, and given that God made us how we are… it follows that God gives modal truths their status as truths… Put the conceptualist analysis of modality together with the truism that God made our nature, and out rolls the central tenet of voluntarism in the form of a theological doctrine. *The analysis provides a philosophical grounding for theology, and is not a distraction from it or a rival or alternative to it.*[54]

Bennett's view has a number of virtues, as we've seen. There are, however, some serious concerns that this analysis of modality raises, not the least of which is what this means for claims that we make about God as a necessary being. As I noted with Frankfurt, there is a serious problem with radical divine voluntarism, viz. that God selects the rules of modality, and thus bootstraps God's way into necessary existence. I noted in Chapter One that the limited possibilist suggests that there must be a difference between truths about God's nature and other truths precisely because of this worry. Of course, as I have noted the problems with this above, we need not rehearse them again. The idea is that there is a paradox, but Bennett thinks he has a way of dissolving the paradox. If the reductive analysis of modality is correct, then what "God exists necessarily" means is "finite minds are incapable of distinctly thinking of God without possessing the attribute of existence," or "the concept of God that is located in finite minds contains, as a constituent part, the property of existence." This serves to weaken Descartes's theology dramatically, and I just pointed out that Bennett thinks that Descartes was concerned to justify his theology on the basis of philosophy. In the face of this, Bennett simply doubles down, noting that the

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[54] (Bennett 1994) p. 648-9 (emphasis mine). See above for passages regarding the Cartesian approach to theology.

problem only arises by rejecting the reductive analysis—"Even if you are right to reject [the reductive analysis], however, my hypothesis that Descartes accepted it is all I need to abolish the bootstraps problem."[55] This answer is, on its face, not terribly compelling, but Bennett may well be right to respond this way (for better or worse). To be concerned with whether or not the necessity of God's existence corresponds to our idea presupposes that one can step outside of her conceptual framework. As a result, the worry relies on a claim that cannot be made. In many ways, this view ends up being very similar to Frankfurt's. Recall that for Frankfurt, the necessity of God's nature results only from psychological necessity. I noted in Chapter One that the answer Frankfurt (or any universal possibilist) should give when confronted with the worry regarding the apparent necessity of God's nature is to note that Descartes is concerned with what it is reasonable to believe—and like Bennett's response, this is unsatisfying.

Yet, there is another problem closely related to this. What of the *proof* for God's existence? Indeed *if* Descartes tries to answer the question, "why does God exist?" with the answer "God necessarily exists" then he is in trouble. It does not follow without argument that just because finite minds cannot conceive of *p*, that it is *actually* impossible that *p* (in an absolute, non-conceptual sense). Bennett is correct in pointing out that this is not the kind of answer that Descartes gives to the "why" question. Whenever explicitly pressed to give an account of *why* God exists, Descartes points to immensity and divine sovereignty rather than the necessity of God's being.[56] Still, what does this mean for the *Fifth Meditation* ontological argument? Bennett's answer is that the *Fifth Meditation* argument is not aimed at answering the *why* question, but the *how* question—how can *finite beings be sure* that God exists? With the aim of the ontological argument shifted from a metaphysical conclusion regarding God's

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[55] (Bennett 1994), p. 650.

[56] See *First Replies* (CSM II, p. 78), *Second Replies* (CSM II, p. 116), and *Fourth Replies* (CSM II, p. 162).

necessary existence to an epistemological claim about *how* it is that finite beings can be confident in their assent to the truth of the claim that God exists, we have a clear answer to the latter question, and not the former.

There are two other concerns that crop up with respect to Bennett's account. The first is the Mesland passage that I noted above. In the 1644 letter to Mesland, Descartes says, "The first 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." But, as I noted in Chapter One, Descartes immediately backs off of the stronger claim saying, "The second consideration assures us that even if this be true, we should not try to comprehend it, since our nature is incapable of doing so."[57] Bennett claims that this was just a mistake on Descartes's part—that on his own view, necessity governs the relations between concepts in finite minds, and to say that God could have done the opposite is just sloppiness on Descartes's part. This strikes me as an unnecessary concession. Recall that in Chapter One I noted that Descartes often retreats from the claims regarding what God could have done because of God's supreme power. Descartes is well aware of the limits of finite cognition, and does not ever explicitly say that God could have done otherwise without walking back the claim citing God's infinite nature and human finitude. Bennett rightly suggests that finite minds can imagine their minds being constituted differently than they currently are. What is inconceivable for finite minds is any *specific content* that would fall under the realm of *possibility'* (where "*possibility*" picks out a different set of relations governing concepts) which is itself inconceivable. This does not completely dissolve the tension that stems from that passage; Descartes does seem to step outside of his own modal analysis for a moment (if Bennett's view is right). Yet, if we interpret this passage not as a claim about what God can do from our perspective, but rather as a claim about the

[57] Descartes to Mesland, 2, May 1644 (CSMK, p. 235).

dependence relation our concepts bear to God, then the tension is eased, even if only slightly.

There is, however, a more glaring issue, and it is an issue that Bennett does not think is a problem. It is the issue regarding Descartes's theory of truth. Bennett's account of modality implies of Descartes that he maintains, at least in part, a subjectivist theory of truth. If what makes modal claims true is only the relation between concepts in finite minds, then there is no need for an external world, or an objective sense of truth. Yet, the traditional interpretation of Descartes on truth is that he offers a correspondence theory of truth, and there is good reason or this, both textual and historical.[58] Bennett does not deny the presence of Descartes's realist leanings, but he does maintain that at work in Descartes's works is a serious tension—Descartes has two accounts of truth in play and "nothing could fit both strands."[59] Bennett does not explicitly mention the correspondence theory, and does not give much weight to the realist strand of reasoning in Descartes's thought. This is, I think, a serious mistake. If we consider the passages where Descartes discusses that the seat of the eternal truths is in the mind, *and* the passage where Descartes seems to commit himself to the correspondence theory of truth, it seems plausible that we might develop an account of truth that is consistent with Bennett's reductive analysis of modality and realism. This would have the benefit of not forcing a radical reinterpretation of Descartes's major writings.

Still there is a lingering worry about whether or not Bennett can get around the kinds of problems that are obvious in universal possibilism. Part of the motivation for Bennett's claim that Descartes is schizophrenic regarding the nature of truth stems from the reductive analysis of modal claims combined with Cartesian methodological solipsism. To be sure,

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[58] See (David 2013), and Descartes to Mersenne, 16, October 1639 (CSMK, p. 139).

[59] (Bennett 1994) p. 652

Descartes is an indirect realist (whether entitled to that view or not) about certain features of the external world, and Bennett simply cannot ignore the passages where Descartes talks about truth as the correspondence between thought and object. It is clear, however, to any reader of the *Meditations* that Descartes seems to begin within the mind and tries to work his way out. Using this approach, there is considerable difficulty finding evidence for the correspondence between ideas and objects in the world. Still, there are further difficulties regarding the truth-makers for such abstract notions as modality. There is no obvious truth-maker outside of the mind, or at least not in the Cartesian system. It is this point, I think, that drives the reductive analysis of modal claims, at least in part. When coupled with Cartesian methodological solipsism, and the idea that Descartes is already in trouble regarding skepticism, Bennett does not think that Descartes can afford anything more than a pragmatic theory in regard to propositions the subject matter of which is anything other than concepts. At least by reducing meaningful modal claims to the relations between concepts there is a ready truth-maker for such claims, and finite beings are left only to trust that these relations track the way the world actually is. Serious problems remain, however. Simply because finite beings cannot coherently entertain the proposition that God is a deceiver, it does not follow that this is not precisely the situation in which they find themselves. If the *First Meditation* meditator's hyperbolic doubt is to be taken seriously at all, then Bennett's reductive analysis does little to nothing to allay her worries regarding the evil genius's ability to create her with a faulty faculty. All of this is to say that, just as happened with Frankfurt's view, Bennett's view does nothing to resolve the skeptical worries raised at the outset of the *Meditations*.

To further illustrate the worry here, consider Putnam's anti-skeptical argument. Putnam maintains that the skeptical scenario is straightforwardly inconceivable because of his commitment to content externalism. The argument runs something like this: the content of my mental states is constituted by the cause of those mental states. Thus when I utter the phrase "I am a brain in a vat" it is false no matter whether I am, in reality, a brain in a vat.

For if I am actually a brain in a vat, then the content of my mental states is constituted by computer-generated images, and thus my words refer to those contents. It is false that I am a computer-generated image of a brain in a computer-generated image of a vat. Alternatively, if I am, in reality, *not* a brain in a vat, then the contents of my mental states are constituted by real brains and real vats. In that case it is still false that I am a brain in a vat, for I am a real person in the real world. Thus, so the story goes, the skeptical scenario cannot meaningfully be stated. The problem, of course, is that in the background here is that inconceivability is not actually tracking metaphysical impossibility, even if metaphysical impossibility is unknowable. The problem with Putnam's response to skepticism is precisely analogous to the problem with Bennett's reductive analysis. If there is no way for finite beings to know whether or not their modal claims track the actual status of the propositions they express, then Descartes is committed to a nasty skepticism—one that precludes even the conceivability of the skeptical scenario. This consequence is very similar to that which we arrived at with Frankfurt's universal possiblilsm. It is importantly different, however. Recall that for Frankfurt's Descartes, finite minds *can* realize and understand that, because of divine omnipotence, modality is merely a feature of finite cognition, and that finite beings can relax and acknowledge, perhaps even enjoy (in some perverse way) the fact that their cognitive limitations allow them to not have to concern themselves with the infinite number of possibilities open to their creator. Thus, even if the Frankfurt-Cartesian were to be worried about whether or not her idea of necessity mapped onto God's she *can* coherently consider that worry, and even recognize that it does not! For Bennett's Descartes, however, the skepticism is worse, precisely because the skeptical scenario is impossible to consider. The Bennett-Cartesian's notion of necessity is indexed to her concepts, and thus she must merely trust, hope, or believe on pragmatic grounds that her ideas match up with the world, all the while finding the skeptical scenario, by definition, impossible to imagine.

But the Skeptical scenario, bad though it is, is not the only problem facing Bennett's interpretation. There is also something inconsistent with the way that Bennett re-tools the

Fifth Meditation argument for God's existence. As I stated above, Bennett argues that the aim of the argument is not to answer the question of *why* God exists, but to answer the question, "how do we know?" If this is the case, the answer, it seems cannot be what Bennett wants it to be—viz. that contained in the very concept of God is existence. The reason that this is not an acceptable answer is an extension of the skeptical worry mentioned above. What finite beings come to know by examining their idea of God is not anything about God, but rather something interesting about their own cognitive constitution. If this sounds familiar, that is because this was actually the central thesis of Frankfurt's universal possibilism.

The same line of reasoning goes for the *Third Meditation* argument as well. I suggested in Chapter One that part of what is happening in the *Third Meditation* is a comparison between the newly understood nature of the self (which includes finitude as an essential feature) and the idea of an infinite being. There is no doubt that in the metaphysical order of things, Descartes thinks that God is primary, and finite beings follow. I suggested that the *Third Meditation* argument results in the meditator recognizing that the idea of an infinite being is prior to the idea of the self. If Bennett is correct, however, the first argument for God's existence fails to prove anything other than that there is an idea the cause of which we cannot (remember, the modality is rigidly designated to our concepts) be. If Bennett is right, it seems that the meditator's proof is utterly useless.

The problem does not stop there, however. Descartes's argument for mind-body dualism relies on the *conceivability* that mind can exist without body. If this conceivability does not track the way the world is, then once again, while there is no necessary connection between the concepts that finite beings have with regard to mind and body, from this (at least on Bennett's view) nothing follows except that finite beings can imagine the two substances being separate. Mind-body dualism is certainly a central tenet of Descartes's philosophy, and while his arguments for the view may not be particularly compelling to many of his readers, Bennett's interpretation serves only to further weaken the argument. The way in which this argument suffers, however, has farther reaching systematic

implications. In *Principles* I.60-62, Descartes lays out his theory of distinctions.[60] Here Descartes defines a "real distinction" as being importantly different from "modal" or "conceptual" distinctions.[61] Real distinctions, Descartes says, guarantee the *actual* separability of substances, while both modal and conceptual distinctions do not pick out features of substances that can actually be separated from substance itself. That is, the latter two kinds of distinctions have no basis in reality, while the former does. Bennett's view entails that *all* three of these distinctions must in some way be merely conceptual. On his view, the 'official' conceptual distinction (that which Descartes names a "conceptual distinction") must be something different, subsumed under the broader conceptual-distinction umbrella. What exactly that would be is unclear. On the face of it, it seems that Bennett simply cannot account for real distinctions; he needs to tell a story about the nature of conceptual-conceptual distinctions, and thus does considerable damage to the Cartesian system.

On Bennett's view all that finite beings can come to *know* with regard to modality is the constitution of their own minds. Again, while this conclusion resembles Frankfurt's, it is importantly different. Recall that for Frankfurt, the knowledge that finite beings come to possess by reflecting on modality is knowledge of how their own minds work, but also that there is no connection (necessary or otherwise) between the constitution of finite minds and the absolute nature of modality from God's point of view. There is, on Frankfurt's view, absolute modality, and it entails that everything is possible. Bennett, on the other hand, maintains that there is no modality beyond what happens in the finite mind. None whatsoever. Thus, when finite beings reflect on necessity and possibility, they come to know *the* nature of modality. Still, as every introductory reader of the *Meditations* recognizes, it is a

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[60] (CSM I, p. 213-4).

[61] Note that by "modal" distinction, Descartes does not mean a distinction between statuses of possibility and necessity, he uses the term to pick out finite modifications of substance.

long way from the mind to the world. Bennett's answer to this, it would seem, has to be to fall back on Descartes's putative commitment to some sort of truth pluralism (correspondence sometimes, and pragmatism others). Yet, this does not square with Descartes's stated view of truth,

> For my part, I have never had any doubts about truth, because it seems a notion so transcendentally clear that nobody can be ignorant of it. There are many ways of examining a balance before using it, but there is no way to learn what truth is, if one does not know it by nature. What reason would we have for accepting anything which could teach us the nature of truth if we did not know that it was true, that is to say, if we did not know truth? Of course it is possible to explain the meaning of the word to someone who does not know the language, and tell him that the word 'truth', in the strict sense, denotes the conformity of thought with its object, but that when attributed to things outside of thought, it means only that they can be the objects of true thoughts, either ours or God's.[62]

It is of course possible that Descartes was merely wrong about the way in which he was using the concept of truth, even if the above quote does capture how he thought about it. Yet, a central part of my project is to see whether or not Descartes can be saved from some of the disastrous consequences of his various commitments. If a sensible view can be teased out without relying on some sort of basic logical error, in this case equivocation on "truth," then that is what should be done. I think that such an account can be given.

Lessons from the Failure of Reductivism

Before I offer my positive account of Cartesian modality, I would like to highlight a few important lessons that come from Bennett's treatment of modality. The most important point that Bennett identifies is that the structure of finite cognition is importantly tied to the nature of meaningful claims about modality on the Cartesian picture. Built into this concession are two distinct claims that I think are important to highlight. The first is the distinction between meaningful and confused claims within the realm of modality. I think

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[62] Descartes to Mersenne, 16, October 1639 (CSMK, p. 139).

that Bennett is correct to the extent that the relation that necessity has to God is importantly different from the relation that necessity has to finite beings. Recall I quoted Bennett as arguing that the relationship between "(i) a thesis relating necessary truths to God [and] (ii) a thesis relating them to us"[63] is disastrous on Frankfurt's interpretation, and acceptable on his own. Bennett realizes that the proper way to understand the relation necessity bears to God is to maintain that (i) God creates certain necessary truths, and that (ii) finite beings come to know them. The details of how Bennett fleshes this out get him into trouble, but the core insight is correct. Finite beings are not in a position to understand the first of the two relations beyond the fact that God *actually did* create the truth-makers for those truths. The clear and distinct perceptions of modal claims really do track the way that God created all things, but to say any more is to go to far. The other claim that is built into my original concession is the specific relation that the constitution of finite minds bears to the modal status of various truths. Any plausible account of Cartesian modality is going to have to account for the places where Descartes locates the eternal truths in the mind. However, the way to account for such truths need not be the way Bennett does. Indeed because of my own methodological commitments, I prefer not to interpret Descartes the way Bennett does unless no other plausible interpretation is available. Below I will offer my own account of these passages that avoids the Frankfurt/Curley/Bennett problems.

Before I offer my own account, however, I would also like to flag another lesson to be learned from Bennett's account. At the outset, Bennett tries to draw a distinction between omnipotence and sovereignty on the basis of the Cartesian commitment to the view that everything, including ethical facts depends on God's freely having willed them into existence. Bennett maintains that God's ability to do anything has no direct connection to the moral evaluation of a state of affairs, and that because there are times where Descartes runs both

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[63] (Bennett 1994) p. 645.

the modal and the moral together, it must be the case that Descartes is not concerned with omnipotence in the way it is often understood (as a universal possibilist might). That Descartes lumps together the modal and the moral is an important insight that Bennett has picked up. In as much as Bennett is trying to draw our attention away from the view that divine voluntarism entails universal possibilism, Bennett is right. As I have noted in Chapter One, divine voluntarism is perfectly consistent with any number of views, ranging from universal possibilism to necessitarianism. That being said, however, Bennett maintains that there is no direct connection between God's ability to do something and the moral evaluation of that state of affairs. This strikes me as an odd proclamation. Descartes's commitment to divine voluntarism seems to have direct and obvious commitments to the legislation of ethical truth; it is only because God willed *p* that *p* is good. This is true for all things.[64] I am not certain that a great deal rests on this, but I do think that while Bennett has a tendency to make somewhat outrageous interpretive claims, he also makes unnecessary concessions, and this is one of them.

The final point that I think is important to tease out of Bennett's analysis has to do with the Cartesian approach to theology. I noted above that Bennett wanted to offer an account of Descartes's modal metaphysics that provides a philosophical grounding for, and is consistent with various theologies, and that is not a distraction from, or a rival alternative to any particular theological doctrine. To some extent, I suspect that this is accurate. Descartes did not engage in theological debates, but rather concerned himself with the philosophical issues surrounding theology. Bennett's view takes this into consideration, but ultimately does significant damage to important parts of the Cartesian system, including Descartes's arguments for God's existence. While Descartes was not a theologian, *per se*, he

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[64] Descartes seems throughout to be committing himself to a radical form of divine command theory. Obviously aware of Socrates's dilemma for Euthyphro, Descartes fully embraces the arbitrariness of God's actions, but from this alone it does not follow that God *could* have willed differently, as noted above.

would certainly have been aware of some of the theological difficulties that his philosophy might run into. He was, after all, acutely aware of the kind of trouble that controversial doctrines can encounter.[65] This is important because an account of Cartesian metaphysical issues that underpin theological issues should be consistent both with the theological trends present in France during the seventeenth century and should not result in serious damage to Descartes's philosophical theology.

With these considerations in mind, and an acute awareness of the ease with which an interpretation of Cartesian modality can be reduced to inconsistency, incoherence, or simply have far-reaching disastrous consequences for another part of the Cartesian philosophical system, we may now turn to my positive account of Cartesian modality. I will here offer some reasons to think that theological mysterianism best captures Descartes's own thoughts while avoiding the pitfalls of both Frankfurt's, Curley's, and Bennett's views. I will also argue that the theological mysterianism that I take Descartes to hold resolves some of the skeptical worries that arise on the conceptualist accounts, and on the traditional reading of Cartesian epistemology.

Sketching Theological Mysterianism

The view that I will be developing over the remainder of this chapter is an attempt to preserve a key insight that Bennett had while avoiding the disastrous consequences that his view entails. The insight that I wish to preserve is that according to Descartes the structure and relations that exist between the concepts that populate the minds of finite beings mirrors, or corresponds to, the nature of the created world. On Bennett's view, for a finite being to try to posit any claim about the nature of absolute modality is to go beyond what can be understood by finite beings because absolute modality does not exist. On my view,

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[65] For a clear example of Descartes's worries regarding the incompatibility of his metaphysics with traditional theology, see his 1633-4 correspondence to Mersenne regarding Galileo (CSMK pp. 40-4).

however, finite beings can clearly and distinctly perceive *at least some* possibilities, and thus *know that* certain things are in fact possible. They cannot know for certain what it is in which that possibility consists. That is, the truth-makers for possibility claims depend on God's power in a way that finite beings cannot grasp or conceptualize. While Bennett offers a reductive analysis of modal language in Descartes, I think that the correct account is much more subtle than that. In keeping with my proposed methodology, I will develop a view that preserves the insight that there are features of possibility and necessity that finite beings cannot know anything about—the truth-makers—(and thus should not try to say anything about) while taking as my starting point the nature of the Cartesian God rather than the nature of finite minds. It is worth noting that there is a difference between mere refraining from judging and the view that I am suggesting. To be sure, there are places where Descartes suggests that finite minds should merely refrain from judgment. While this suggestion is true for some aspects of possibility and necessity on my view, the difference, I will argue, is that the truth-makers for the propositions picked out by putative claims regarding absolute modality are ineffable and unanalyzable. There is a notable difference between grasping *entirely* a confused idea and refraining from judging it to be true or false, and understanding that mind and body *can* separate, for example, while *failing* to grasp the truth-makers for that proposition. In the latter case, the understanding of modal truth is not confused or incorrect, it is true. What we don't know is what makes it true. I will argue that while the range of knowable modal propositions is limited to what is clearly and distinctly understood; Descartes has the resources to develop a theory of possibility and necessity that is sufficiently robust to resolve some of the tensions in his account of mind-body dualism, free-will, and his epistemology more broadly.

God's Nature and Relation to Time

The appropriate starting point for our explanation of Cartesian modality is the nature of the Cartesian God. There is no shortage of passages where Descartes addresses God's

nature, and in many of them he discusses (or at least hints at) God's relation to modality. The account that I am trying to build is one that builds on Descartes's cageyness with regard to formally asserting what can and cannot be said about an all-powerful being. Here I will make the case for what may seem like a counter-intuitive claim: Descartes's God is an impersonal being that more closely matches the Augustinean neo-Platonic conception of *The One*, rather than the traditional God-as-personal conception of many theists.

While the way that Descartes discusses God, and God's hypothetical evil counterpart, early in the *Meditations* sounds eminently personal in nature, to presume on the basis of this that Descartes actually thought of God in this way is too hasty. I noted above the passage from the *Preface to the Reader*, where Descartes reminds us that it is a mistake to attribute human feelings to God, or to suppose that finite minds possess the capacities necessary to accurately grasp God's nature. In Chapter One, I highlighted a number of passages where Descartes expresses that God's nature is well beyond anything that finite minds can grasp, and it is often because of some combination of the limitless power that God possesses and the supreme simplicity of God's nature. While there is plenty of textual evidence supporting the claim that Descartes was committed to the DDS,[66] there is also evidence from the historical context that surrounds Descartes's philosophical pursuits that suggests my neo-Platonic reading. Frankfurt correctly notes (in a footnote) that a contemporary of Descartes's named Pierre de Bérulle substantially influenced Descartes's thinking about the divine. The reason that this is interesting is because Bérulle was the founder of the French School of Spirituality, was a Cardinal in the church, and his own work focused on the unity and simplicity of the divine nature. Frankfurt offers as a "plausible conjecture" that Descartes came to accept DDS because of Bérulle.[67] In light of the

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[66] Specifically, recall the letter to Mersenne 27, May, 1630, where Descartes denies that there is even a *conceptual* priority of one attribute over any other (CSMK, p. 25).

[67] See (Frankfurt, Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths 1977), n. 7, p. 41.

influence Bérulle had on Descartes, it is not unreasonable to think that the Cartesian approach to the divine should mirror the Oratorian's views. This connection is interesting for a number of reasons. First, the connection between Bérulle and Descartes provides further evidence that Descartes was committed to a strict understanding of the identity of the divine attributes (which precludes any commitment to possible essences pre-existing in God's nature). Second, the Bérulle connection, when taken in conjunction with the passage from the *Preface to the Reader*, provides further evidence for the reading of God as an impersonal being. Third, the connection will help solidify Cartesian mysterianism regarding certain issues in epistemology. Finally, the Bérulle connection will help to elucidate the relation that the Cartesian God bares to modality and what can be said regarding that topic.

In Chapter One I offered quotations from Descartes that suggested a strict form of DDS, and the connection with Bérulle further strengthens this suggestion. What follows from Descartes's commitment to DDS, however, is not immediately clear. Below I will discuss the issue of how finite beings can know certain truths about God, but before I address those concerns it is important to tease out a few key issues about God and God's relation to creation. Descartes unequivocally states that everything that exists depends for its existence on God's creative act. The scope of creation for Descartes, however, extends beyond what we might think of as "things." In the *Sixth Replies*, Descartes offers a clear statement of the scope of God's causal power as it follows from DDS. He says,

> I mean that there is not even any priority of order, or nature, or of 'rationally determined reason' as they call it such that God's idea of the good impelled him to choose one thing rather than another. For example, God did not will the creation of the world in time because he saw that it would be better this way than if he had created it from eternity; nor did he will that the three angles of a triangle should be equal to two right angles because he recognized that it could not be otherwise and so on. On the contrary, it is because he willed to create the world in time that it is better this way than if he had created it from eternity; and it is because he willed that

> the three angles of a triangle should necessarily equal two right angles that this is true and cannot be otherwise; and so on in other cases.[68]

Several issues are at play in this passage. Up front we see a clear statement of the DDS, there is no room for even "rationally determined reason" within God to motivate his creative act. From this it follows that everything that exists was created ex nihilo (or at least eminently from God's own nature), and is good merely in virtue of God's having made it. Descartes often describes God as "eternal" or "immutable," but there are two senses in which he might mean this. On one interpretation of God's eternality and immutability, God exists in and across time (understood as a discreet series of events), yet God remains unchanging and is thus immutable.[69]

Alternatively, God might exist outside of, and explanatorily prior to time. The latter interpretation could easily be read off of the way that Descartes describes God's relation to time. In light of DDS and the scope of God's power, God might not be the kind of being that exists in time, but rather exists independent and explanatorily prior to time. There is further evidence that this is the correct reading of the eternality of God, in light of Descartes's views on DDS. The key here would be to stress the unity and simplicity of God's nature; since there is no distinction between God's attributes, and the unity of God's nature seems to imply that since there is only one single activity in God that is "entirely simple and pure," there is little room for God to be engaged in a temporal act of creation from one moment to the next.

I do not intend to take a stand on what the correct interpretation is, and certainly referring to only one passage in Descartes will not settle the debate. Instead I suggest that regardless of one's commitment regarding the best way to interpret God's eternality, one is committed to mysterianism. On the view that God exists in and across time, one must

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[68] *Sixth Replies* (CSM II, p. 291).

[69] For a defense of the view that the Cartesian God exists in time see: (Gorham 2008).

reconcile divine simplicity and the unity of God's one simple action with the discreet creation of each event in time. This, of course, will require something more than understanding that God is omnipotent in order to fully make sense of the claim. Yet, finite beings cannot grasp God's omnipotence, thus how it is that God *could* be simultaneously simple and unified, but acting discreetly is beyond the grasp of such beings, so they ought not try to judge what that possibility is. Alternatively, if God is timeless and perfectly simple and every event is present and follows from one supremely simple act of intellection/understanding/power/creation/etc., then mysterianism still follows. On this view of eternality, since God has created the world the way it is, and has created, all at once, everything that was, is, and will be the case, it is impossible for finite minds to makes sense of how God can engage in the constant creation of the world, a doctrine that Descartes may have come across in Bérulle.[70]

One might object that if the Cartesian God exists outside of time and created the entire series of events at once, this fact entails a determinist system. Of course, determinism follows from God's existing in time, when conjoined with the constant creation doctrine. Again, either way one interprets the issue concerning God's relation to time, the outcome is identical. But, if Descartes is a determinist, then the role of human freedom in the Cartesian system suffers, and human freedom is central to the Cartesian project. I will return to the topic of Cartesian freedom of finite beings in Chapter Five, but for now I will head off this objection by pointing to a few places where Descartes could plausibly be read as endorsing at least theological determinism. The best candidates for statements expressing Descartes's commitment to theological determinism appear in the correspondence with Elizabeth. In 1645 Descartes wrote, "…the slightest thought could not enter into a person's mind without

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[70] (Popkin 1998). Popkin suggests that one of the ways in which Descartes may be understood to be furthering the Oratorian tradition is by systematizing the constant creation of the world according to God's will.

God's willing, and having willed from all eternity that it should so enter."[71] Descartes does not seem to shy away from the claim that God preordains even the thoughts that finite beings have *from all eternity*. While there is significant work to be done in order to demonstrate that Descartes is in fact committed in a strong sense to theological determinism, and that this commitment is compatible with his account of human freedom (and thus the rest of his philosophy), such a treatment will have to wait. For now it is worth noting that during a discussion of an issue that is influenced by the Cartesian theory of possibility, Descartes seems to posit further evidence for the claim that the created world is deterministic, at least theologically.

The Scope of Finite Cognitive Limitations Regarding God

One further challenge facing my interpretation is the issue of how it is that finite beings can know anything about God's nature, and how it is that finite beings can say anything at all meaningfully (or for that matter, truthfully) about God. If, after all, God is infinite, infinitely powerful, impersonal and supremely simple, then it seems that the conceptual tools that finite beings have are going to fall well short of getting at God appropriately. If this is the case, then it seems that Descartes is in trouble, and my account has done nothing to mitigate the problems that Bennett's view faces. In fact, it might even be worse. To some extent, this objection is right on the mark. Central to the quietist view is the claim that there are certain propositions that finite minds just are not in the epistemic position to fully grasp, and thus finite beings should not attempt to speak of them. Fortunately for Descartes, I do not think that God's nature needs to be one of the topics that is entirely off limits, and that is a very good thing, as Descartes manages to say a good deal about that which it seems he cannot speak.

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[71] Descartes to Elisabeth, 6, October 1645 (CSMK, p. 272). See also, *Principles* I.40 (CSM, I p. 206); Descartes to Elisabeth, 3, November 1645 (CSMK, p. 277); *Passions* II. 145-146 (CSM, I p. 380-81).

There can be no doubt that Descartes talks about God quite a bit in his written works. In Chapter One, I offered a number of passages where Descartes talks at great length about God and God's relation to creation. A recurring theme, however, was that finite beings possess cognitive limitations that prevent them from properly grasping, understanding or making sense of certain propositions. It is on the basis of this theme, in conjunction with the insight regarding Bérulle's influence on Descartes that I would like to advance a more controversial thesis. That thesis is that the kind of access that finite minds have to God and God's nature is no different than the access that finite beings have to most other truth-makers. It is just that for the most part, Cartesians do not really have access to the truth-makers for those truths that are most evident to them. That is, Descartes thinks that only in a few cases do finite beings ever grasp the truth-makers for those beliefs that are most evidently true; usually they only see that the claim is true. Clearly and distinctly understood possibilities, I will argue, have ineffable truth-makers that depend in some way on God. I also maintain that everything Descartes says about God and God's nature is consistent with recognizing truths about God, even without being able to suss out the truth-maker for those claims. It is because of the fact that finite beings recognize God's supreme goodness that they know what they clearly and distinctly perceive is true. Yet it is because of God's inconceivable power that finite minds cannot grasp the creatures that make true clearly understood modal claims. There is, however, a way that God is, and that simple nature cannot be grasped, even though one can, so to speak, touch it with her mind's eye. There are good systematic reasons to think that this is likely the correct reading. The passage from the *Preface to the Meditations* where Descartes stresses the impersonal nature of God's essence, when coupled with his insistence on divine simplicity and his consistent mentioning of the fact that finite minds cannot *grasp* infinity, provides evidence for the view. I will return to this again in the next chapter. Descartes offers us some exposition of the idea of 'grasping'—grasping is importantly different from understanding—and its relation to 'ideas' in the *Appendix to the Fifth Replies*. He writes,

> The next point, namely that if I did have [an idea of God] I would grasp it, has no basis. Since the word 'grasp' implies some limitation, a finite mind cannot grasp God, who is infinite. But that does not prevent him having a perception of God, just as one can touch a mountain without being able to put one's arms around it.[72]

This passage is important for a number of reasons. Descartes identifies the idea that finite beings have of God as a *perception*.

It is worth noting, however, that Descartes often discusses clear and distinct perception in terms of what we see with the "minds eye."[73] This kind of intellectual perception is not to be confused, however, with the picturing of an exemplar, which Descartes calls "imagining."[74] In the case of geometrical shapes, Descartes says, the ideas are innate, and are illuminated by the natural light. This kind of language, and the distinction between the imagining of a particular triangle and the clear and distinct perception of *triangularity* resembles Plato's epistemology in a couple of ways. The most obvious is that the light of nature sounds like a call-back to the post-cave agents in Plato's allegory. More importantly, however, is that the idea of triangularity (as well as other geometrical figures) is innate in us, and can be recollected.[75] The idea of God, I suggest, is less an "idea," and more of a series of discreet ideas which finite beings recognize as true and later reflect upon. The "idea" of God is unlike ideas we have of geometrical figures because the latter can be grasped while God cannot, but they are alike in that neither perception gets us the truth-maker for the perception. The mind only recognizes, in virtue of the nature of truth, that something conforms to the idea in each case. In the above quotation, we see Descartes explaining to Gassendi that to 'grasp' an idea or a concept is to be able to hold it before the mind in its entirety, and since God is infinite while humans are finite, the cognitive

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[72] *Appendix to the Fifth Replies* (CSM II, pp. 273-74).

[73] See, for example, *Third Meditation* (CSM II, p. 27).

[74] See, for example, *Sixth Meditation* (CSM II, p. 50).

[75] For a full account of Cartesian innate ideas, see (Newman 2005).

limitations that humans have prevents such an experience. Such a limitation, however, does not count against the possibility that finite beings can still have an intellectual perception of, and indeed an *experience* of God. Just as the immensity of a mountain does not preclude one from understanding or feeling some part of it even if one cannot grasp the whole thing, so is the case with a perception of God. Should we interpret Descartes as being influenced by the mystical undertones of the kind I have been suggesting, this passage makes a great deal of sense. The supreme unity of the divine and the immensity of God's power together imply that a finite being cannot really grasp God, but through clear and distinct perceptions of the divine, humans can still come to know certain features of God.

The mountain analogy is particularly helpful for precisely this reason.[76] Beside the obvious value that the analogy offers with regard to elucidating the finitude of human cognition, the analogy gives us a further indication that Descartes has at his disposal resources that become all the more powerful when conjoined with neo-Platonic mysticism. While vision is often taken to be the paradigmatic case of perceptual experience (and is likely what most think of in the *First Meditation* skeptical considerations), the sense of touch is arguably just as vivid an experience, and more obviously calls to mind the notion of direct access. If one comes into contact with a mountain, there are a number of things that she might come to learn about it. In the same way, coming into contact with truths about God can teach us a few things about the nature of the divine. I will return to this issue and spell it out further in Chapter Three. For now it is sufficient to note that direct awareness of truths

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[76]Cf. *First Replies*, "When we look at the sea, our vision does not encompass its entirety, nor do we measure out its enormous vastness; but we are still said to 'see' it. In fact if we look from a distance so that our vision almost covers the entire sea at one time, we see it only in a confused manner, just as we have a confused picture of a chiliagon when we take in all its sides at once. But if we fix our gaze on some part of the sea at close quarters, then our view can be clear and distinct, just as our picture of a chiliagon can be, if it is confined to one or two of the sides. In the same way, God cannot be taken in by the human mind, and I admit this, along with all theologians. Moreover, God cannot be distinctly known by those who look from a distance as it were, and try to make their minds encompass his entirety all at once" (CSM II, p. 81).

about God's nature is a convenient and consistent way to get a grip on what Descartes means by his discussion of coming into contact with God and that it enjoys textual support.

A finite being can recognize many of the features that Descartes himself describes God as possessing: e.g. simplicity, immutability, and sovereignty. She will no doubt notice that God is not the kind of being that possesses human affectations; that God is impersonal. What is tricky about this, however, is that Descartes consistently reminds us that even though it is "clear enough how God accomplishes all things in a single act […] these matters are not to be grasped by our powers of reasoning."[77] That this is the case, however, need not count against my view. In fact, I consider this point to be in my favor. While finite beings are not in a position to grasp the entirety of God's nature, there are a number of things that finite beings can *correctly* say about God, in virtue of having clear and distinct ideas of God. No matter where we land on the issue of God's relation to time, God is not the kind of being that can correctly be described as subject to change. Thus it is *true* that God is immutable. God's will does not change, and as far as finite beings can tell, it cannot change (of course, Descartes tells us that finite minds ought not try to say definitively what God can or cannot do, as to do so is to go beyond that which they can clearly understand). What makes these claims true lies beyond what finite minds can understand, but *that* they are true is indubitable.

While there are some superficial similarities between my view in this regard and the Frankfurt/Bennett views, the impersonal nature of the Neo-Platonic God precludes Descartes's God being understood as a deceiver. Recall the warning in the *Preface to the Meditations*; Descartes reminds us that we will avoid many traditional difficulties if we properly refrain from projecting finite affectations onto God. If God is not the kind of being that has intentional states, then God simply cannot be the kind of being that is concerned

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[77] *Conversation with Burman* (CSMK p. 348).

with deceiving finite beings. In effect, my reading of Descartes gets God's non-deceiver status as a freebee. There is, however, some difficulty that derives from my characterization of God as a Neo-Platonic unity when conjoined with the Cartesian commitment to the limits of finite cognition. If all of the Cartesian God's attributes are strictly identical in the way that is required by the characterization that I am presenting, then it seems that finite beings are simply going to be incapable of conceptualizing God adequately. To be sure, as an extension of the immutability concern I discussed above there is reason to believe that any attempt to discuss God through only one of his attributes does seem to fall short of an adequate conception of God. Thus there seems to be some question as to just how much a finite being can conceptualize or propositionalize accurately any thoughts about God. Descartes does, I think, have at his disposal the conceptual resources necessary to handle this worry. In particular, Descartes is careful to draw a distinction between what he calls "adequate" ideas and ideas that are clear and distinct.

> Indeed the difference between complete and adequate knowledge is that if a piece of knowledge is to be *adequate* it must contain absolutely all the properties which are in the thing which is the object of knowledge. Hence only God can know that he has adequate knowledge of all things.
>
> A created intellect, by contrast, though perhaps it may in fact possess adequate knowledge of many things, can never know it has such knowledge unless God grants it a special revelation of the fact. In order to have adequate knowledge of a thing all that is required is that the power of knowing possessed by the intellect is adequate for the thing in question, and this can easily occur. But in order for the intellect to know it has such knowledge, or that God put nothing in the thing beyond what it is aware of, its power of knowing would have to equal the infinite power of God, and this plainly could never happen on pain of contradiction.[78]

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[78] *Fourth Replies* (CSM II, p. 155). See also (Patterson 2010). She writes, "Descartes holds that a created intellect may have adequate knowledge of many things, but cannot know that it has such knowledge unless God grants it special revelation of that fact (2:155; AT 7:220). Since divine revelation is not needed to know that one has a clear and distinct perception, an idea of *x* need not contain all the properties of *x* in order to be clear and distinct"

With recourse to this distinction, I think that Descartes can handle the concerns about the ability to conceptualize the truth, and not the truth-maker of modal claims. Furthermore, I have suggested above that Descartes's considered theory of truth is the correspondence theory. I think that this fact provides Descartes with just the tools needed to explain away any tension that exists between the finite mind's access to God and God's nature. It seems to me that there is no reason to think that Descartes's realism requires that there is only *one true description* of the way that God is, and that such a description is beyond the grasp of finite minds. To be sure, there is a way that God is, and from the Angels' or God's point of view it is likely quite different from that of the finite perspective. Still, while the thought "God is immutable" is in some sense a confused (inadequate) representation of God; there is a degree to which the proposition expressed by the thought corresponds to God.[79] I will flesh this account out further in Chapter Three.

Mysterianism and Cartesian Modal Epistemology

A further concern regarding the quietist view is where and how one will be able to stop the mysterianism. If there are too many things that cannot correctly or meaningfully be said, then it seems that while my interpretation of Descartes moves away from incoherence, the cost of this move is so great that it is almost not worth it. The concern above regarding knowledge of God's nature is a specific example of this more general worry, and my response to that specific objection is an instance of my general strategy. At the end of the

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[79] In (Fumerton 2002), Richard Fumerton has argued for the view that correspondence can come in degrees and that a realist need not be committed to there being "some one complete true description of the world." Of particular relevance is the following: "Is there one true correct or accurate way to paint a landscape? The two of us stare out at the horizon and begin our respective paintings. We will perhaps employ quite different styles or use quite different materials. Our final products may be interestingly different in all kinds of ways. Each can still correctly be described as a picture of the landscape and we may be able to see the way in which each of the very different pictures corresponds to the landscape. Would it be possible, even in principle, to exhaust the ways in which we might paint (represent) that scene? The philosopher who thinks of thought as the primary vehicle of truth can surely invoke this metaphor to challenge the idea that there would, even in principle, be some way of exhausting true descriptions of a world" (pp. 13-14).

day, my approach to Cartesian modal epistemology is really quite traditional. Following the truth-rule laid out in the *Third Meditation*,[80] I will argue that those modal claims that finite beings clearly and distinctly perceive actually track the way that the world is set up. When one clearly and distinctly perceives that something is possible, it actually is. Descartes implies as much in the *Second Replies,* "But we have the idea of a power so great that the possessor of the power, and he alone, created the heavens and the earth and is capable of producing everything that I understand to be possible."[81] The nature, scope, and character of clear and distinct perceptions are all complicated issues and I will flesh them out in Chapter Three. Regarding modality, I will argue that there are modal truths that finite beings can know are true even when they cannot fully grasp the content of them, or conceptualize their truth-maker. I will also argue that clear and distinct perceptions reliably indicate the truth of their contents.

Descartes consistently suggests that finite beings are aware of the *fact* of God's sovereignty, even while he simultaneously warns them not to be so arrogant as to think that they can grasp the *extent* of God's power. There are a few points to make regarding this: (a) the inability of finite beings to grasp infinite power is both textually and intuitively well supported, (b) that 'God is omnipotent' corresponds (to a degree) to a really existing object is jointly entailed by the clarity and distinctness with which finite minds perceive the truth, and the nature of truth and (c) since finite beings cannot grasp God's nature, it should be clear that what is entailed by the God's power is beyond the scope of what can be grasped by finite beings. It is this limitation that motivates the mysterianism.

In keeping with my goal of refraining from causing damage to the broader Cartesian programme, I intend to work within the framework of clear and distinct ideas, using as a

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[80] (CSM II, p. 24).

[81] (CSM II, p. 119).

paradigm case of modal knowledge the separability of mind and body. Descartes argues for the *real* distinction between mind and body on the basis of a conceivability-possibility link in the *Sixth Meditation*. There we see Descartes argue for the distinction between mind and body on the basis that one can clearly and distinctly perceive that the essence of the self is a thinking, non-extended thing. He also suggests that he has a separate clear perception that the essence of body is extension, which is non-mental. That he has these two distinct, clear perceptions of the essences of the constituent features of himself, and that they have inconsistent essences, he thinks, demonstrates the separability of the two substances.

There are well known objections to this argument, and I will not address the Cartesian answer to them here.[82] What is important for my purposes here is the relation between the clear and distinct perceptions finite beings have and modality generally. In particular, I want to stress that there are certain modal propositions of which finite beings can clearly and distinctly conceive. These are the claims that finite beings can meaningfully think about and reliably recognize as true. When finite beings cannot grasp the content of these self-evident propositions, it should not come as a surprise that what follows from the true proposition will not itself be clearly understood. There are, I will argue, a few cases of this. That God's nature is a paradigm example of a directly recognized truth the content of which cannot be grasped will have far-reaching implications for modal knowledge.

By framing various interpretive issues in Cartesian scholarship in terms of his peculiar modal metaphysics and epistemology, I think that many interpretive puzzles can be resolved. One example is the link between mind and body. In a letter to Elizabeth, Descartes points out that there is a tension between the recognition that mind and body are essentially distinct beings, and that they are somehow joined together. He says,

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[82] For a nice summary of the objections to the conceivability/possibility argument for the separability of mind and body, see (Vaidya 2011). I will spell out the objections and flesh out what I take to be the proper Cartesian response in Chapter Four.

> It does not seem to me that the human mind is capable of forming a very distinct conception of both the distinction between the soul and the body and their union; for to do this it is necessary to conceive them as a single thing and at the same time to conceive them as two things; and this is absurd.[83]

Here we see Descartes pointing to both the cognitive limitations of finite beings, and an implication of the divine sovereignty. For, if one were to try to hold before her mind the real distinction between substances and their unity, she would face incoherence. Yet, such a state-of-affairs is obviously the case.[84] In Chapter Four, I will use this issue as a handy example to build Descartes's account of modal epistemology. I will argue for the claim that the seemingly impossible conjunction of incompatible essences is an implication of God's nature, and thus should not be put before the minds of finite beings, even though the fact of their union can be clearly known. This helps to illustrate what is an important feature of the theological mysterian position—that there is an asymmetry between the conceivability/possibility relation and the relation between inconceivability and impossibility. That asymmetry amounts to this: clear and distinct conceivability tracks actual possibility and necessity, while inconceivability sometimes reflects the finitude of finite cognition; finite beings ought not try to conceptualize that which is beyond their grasp.

In Chapter Five, I will offer a sustained treatment of another interpretive issue in Cartesian scholarship that can be resolved by the application of the theological mysterian position: the Cartesian view of the freedom of finite wills. As with many other issues in Cartesian scholarship, the issue of freedom cannot, I will argue, be properly understood without recourse to both modal knowledge and modal metaphysics. My interpretive strategy there will mirror the strategy that I take generally: there are facts about human freedom that finite minds clearly and distinctly recognize as true, and there are facts about God's nature

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[83] Descartes to Elisabeth, 28, June 1643 (CSMK, p. 227).

[84] In the same letter, Descartes maintains that every human has a "primitive notion" of the union between the body and soul.

that seem to conflict with this experience of freedom. The move here, I will argue is to stress that there are certain facts that can be clearly conceived of, and others which finite beings cannot conceptualize. In this case, the experience of freedom in finite beings belongs to the former set and the implications of God's sovereignty to the latter. What follows from this distinction on my reading is just what Descartes himself says regarding the seeming tension between freedom and divine preordination, "it would be absurd, simply because we do not grasp one thing, which we know must by its very nature to be beyond our comprehension, to doubt something else of which we have an immediate grasp and which we experience within ourselves."[85]

Conclusion: How Theological Mysterianism Avoids the Bennett and Frankfurt Problems

Before launching into my full account of Cartesian modal epistemology, I think it would be prudent to review the ground that I have covered so far. Recall that the problems facing Frankfurt's universal possibilism and Bennett's reductivism were remarkably similar. Both views are built on the claim that there is a distinction between absolute modality (that which governs God's act of creation) and created modality. For Frankfurt, finite beings can know that literally everything is possible for God, and that nothing they recognize as necessary need be true at all. For Bennett, absolute modality is beyond what can be meaningfully understood by finite minds, but possibility and necessity is reduced to intrinsic connections the concepts that populate finite minds bear to one another. The most important worry, on both interpretations, is that Descartes's account of modality seriously runs the risk of incoherence. For Frankfurt the worry was that finite beings recognize that God is so powerful that literally any state-of-affairs is possible for God. This is a problem

[85] *Principles* I.41 (CSM I, p. 206). The title of this principle is "How to reconcile the freedom of the will with divine preordination."

because there is one fact the veracity of which the whole account relies on, viz. that God is supremely powerful. The concern facing Bennett's view is related, but slightly subtler. Given Bennett's reductive analysis of modal concepts, the facts about God's nature that finite beings come to have inform humans *only* about what is contained in the concepts with which they find their own minds populated—that is, there is no reason to think that the arguments Descartes gives for the existence of God have anything other than purely rhetorical effect. While humans cannot doubt that God is omnipotent (as the concept 'omnipotence' is contained within the concept of 'God'), this tells us nothing about the actual nature of God.

Despite the failures of universal possibilism and reductivism, there are some key insights from both views. I have sketched an account of Cartesian modality that takes into account the virtues of both of these views and avoids the pitfalls of each as well. By way of summary, my account of theological mysterianism amounts to this. There no distinction between absolute and created modality, finite beings have direct access to modal facts, and can track them by way of clear and distinct perceptions. While finite beings have direct access to the truth of certain modal propositions, they cannot grasp the truth-makers for these facts. Finite beings know *that* the proposition "mind and body are separable, even if they are now conjoined" is true, even though they cannot work out what it is that makes this true. The same account applies to facts about God and God's nature. Picking up on the intellectual-historical context surrounding Descartes's pursuit of philosophical thought, I stress the influence of French mysticism on Descartes's conception of the divine. Thus, there are facts about God's nature that finite beings know to be true, even though they cannot grasp what makes them true. Here the same account of knowledge applies—an instance of clear and distinct perception with regard to some fact about God provides finite beings with knowledge of the truth of propositions that correspond (to some degree) to God, even though humans cannot grasp what makes them true. Since finite beings cannot grasp God's nature, it follows that they cannot work out what God's nature entails. While finite beings can recognize that the proposition 'God is omnipotent' is true, to try to infer

from this anything about the nature of absolute modality is to assert something that is well beyond the scope of what can be understood given the limitations of finite beings. Thus to try to make sense of what God *could* have done is impossible. In order to circumvent the truth-pluralism account Bennett advocates, I suggest that the truth of certain modal claims is on a par with God's nature in the following sense: finite minds recognize the truth of them, and see that the propositions that they clearly and distinctly perceive must correspond to truth-makers, but they cannot make sense of what those truth-makers might be.

Theological mysterianism avoids many of the problems that Bennett's reductive account faces, and also avoids the incoherence present in Frankfurt's view. Theological mysterianism has the virtue of preventing damage to the broader Cartesian system, both philosophical and physical. In the next chapter I will flesh out a full account of Cartesian epistemology on the basis of theological mysterianism.

CHAPTER THREE: CLEARLY, CARTESIANS CAN KNOW SOMETHING ABOUT THE ACTUAL WORLD

Introduction

In the previous chapter I discussed some of the key problems facing both Frankfurt's universal possibilism, Curley's limited possibilism and Bennett's reductivism as interpretations of Cartesian modality. The greatest problem facing both of these views is that the coherence of the view is in question. Frankfurt's view is internally inconsistent, Curley's view, if it does not collapse into universal possibilism, suffers from serious internal difficulties, and I argued that Bennett's view nearly collapses into Frankfurt's. Even if, however, we grant the coherence of these views, Frankfurt and Bennett still face a further problem: moving from knowledge of the mind to the world. If either interpretation is correct, then it is unclear how it is that Descartes could maintain that finite beings know anything about the world as it is actually is, let alone about how the world *might* be. A natural response that the proponent of either view could offer would be to shrug her shoulders and say, "Well, Descartes has this problem himself, I'm just trying to tell you what his view probably was." In fact, Curley does this explicitly in his paper! Of course, this response also falls in line with a traditional interpretation of Descartes wherein he does such a good job introducing skeptical worries in the *First Meditation* that he can never actually overcome his own challenges and move from the content of the mind to the cause of his experiences. Descartes's problems are bolstered on the basis of a conceptualist modal metaphysics. What I want to do, however, is to stay in line with my interpretive commitment to approach Descartes as a systematic thinker without doing major damage to his philosophical system. That said, Descartes does certainly think that there is quite a bit about the way the world really is that finite beings can know. He also claims that there are a number of things that finite beings can know about how the world could be. If Frankfurt is right, it is unclear how it is that a finite being can know anything outside of her own mind, and the same goes for Bennett. Bennett, at least, is honest about this problem (recall that for Bennett, Descartes

was largely a pragmatist about truth), but foists it back onto Descartes; an interpretive move that I maintain must be reserved for times when it turns out that *every* possible interpretation results in irreparable damage to a central tenet of the Cartesian philosophical or scientific system.

One need not look far to find examples of actual states of affairs that Descartes thinks finite beings can know. For instance, Descartes thinks that we can know that God exists and is not a deceiver, that so long as he thinks he exists, that Aristotle was wrong about any number of things, that the nature of body is extension, that body is essentially inert, and so on. The vast majority of Descartes's writings concern the nature and behavior of physical bodies. Only in *Part One* of the *Principles* do we find what is now understood to be squarely within the realm of philosophy.[1] So it is clear that Descartes thinks that finite beings should concern themselves not only with first philosophy, but also with the structure of the world as it actually exists. In the previous chapter I argued that on both Frankfurt and Bennett's accounts knowledge of the *external world* as it actually is becomes basically impossible. For if the truths that finite beings cannot but assent to need not even be true, then psychological certainty is the best Descartes can hope for.[2] I noted also that Frankfurt even sees this implication of his own view. If it were the case that Descartes held a coherence theory of truth, this might not be a problem. For if psychological certainty were the best that a Cartesian could hope for, then ensuring that her beliefs formed a coherent set

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[1] *Part Two* of the *Principles* is titled "The Principles of Material things" and concerns the behavior of what later became known as *primary qualities*—predominately the physics of motion and number. *Part Three* (titled, "The Visible Universe") is all about Cartesian cosmology, resembling his work in *Le Monde*. *Part Four,* "The Earth," explains the basic constituents of the planet.

[2] This is more obvious on Frankfurt's view than it is on Bennett's. Still, a quick argument that Bennett succumbs to this same problem is based on the necessity worries I stressed regarding God's nature. If "God necessarily exists and is no deceiver" just means "contained within my concept of God is existence and non-deception", as Bennett's view entails, then God's serving as a divine guarantee of the veracity of clearly and distinctly perceived truths becomes unhelpful. After all, what makes it true is nothing about God, but only something about how finite beings think. This is no different than Frankfurt's psychological guarantee.

would serve as a way to carve off the worries about whether anything actually matches up with an internally consistent set of psychologically certain beliefs. Yet, there is compelling textual evidence that Descartes did not subscribe to such an account of truth, and Frankfurt even came to recognize this.[3] In a letter to Mersenne, Descartes says that truth, "seems a notion so transcendentally clear that nobody can be ignorant of it… Of course it is possible to explain the meaning of the word to someone who does not know the language, and tell him that the word 'truth,' in the strict sense, denotes the conformity of thought with its object…"[4] From this passage, it is clear that Descartes held a correspondence theory of truth. Yet, if Descartes held such a theory of truth, then the interpretations Frankfurt and Bennett advance have unacceptable, and to my mind avoidable, consequences for the Cartesian project.

An important part of the Cartesian project is, as I mentioned above, the goal of eliminating false beliefs. Since Descartes is committed to the correspondence theory of truth, false beliefs must be beliefs that somehow fail to correspond to some feature of the world. If the finite mind is to avoid error then it seems that Descartes must provide us with some guide that helps us distinguish beliefs that are veridical from those that are simply the ravings of the "madmen, whose brains are so damaged by the persistent vapours of melancholia that they firmly maintain they are kings when they are paupers, or say they are dressed in purple when they are naked, or that their heads are made of earthenware, or that they are pumpkins, or made of glass."[5] Fortunately for us, Descartes does provide such a guide: the clarity and

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[3] In (Frankfurt, Demons, Dreamers, & Madmen: the Defense of Reason in Descartes's Meditations 1970) Frankfurt argued that Descartes held a coherence theory of truth, "The conception of truth involved in his question about the truth of what is clearly and distinctly perceived is, in other words, one of *coherence*, rather than *correspondence*" (p. 170). However, Frankfurt later retracted this claim citing that there is "no textual evidence to support that suggestion; on the contrary, whenever Descartes gives an explicit account of truth he explains it unequivocally as correspondence with reality" in (Frankfurt, Descartes on the Consistency of Reason 1978), p. 37.

[4] Descartes to Mersenne, 16 October, 1639 (CSMK, p. 139).

[5] *First Meditation* (CSM II, p. 13).

distinctness of an idea. In this chapter I am going to first address how it is that finite beings are supposed to understand these features of ideas. Following Descartes's proposed methods, I will work less with the formal definitions of 'clarity' and 'distinctness' (though I will note how Descartes does define them himself) and instead focus on examples of ideas of the actual world that putatively possess these features. I will then turn to a discussion of how it is that Descartes can move from clear and distinct ideas to the existence of the objects of those ideas. I will argue that the bridge from mind to world is facilitated by a direct apprehension of the truth of certain facts about the world. I will argue that the scope of what clear and distinct ideas get us is limited; I will suggest that on the Cartesian picture, clear and distinct perceptions help finite minds recognize that in certain cases a proposition is true, but in many cases fail to help us understand what the truth-maker for the proposition is. In this way, the scope of what is known about the world is preserved, but *how* it is known is limited. In this way, rational insight serves the crucial function of getting finite minds *to* the external world, but *only* that far.

Cartesian Knowledge: *Scientia* and *Cognitio*

Before discussing the ways in which finite beings come to possess knowledge of the world, there is an important wrinkle that needs to be ironed out. When discussing knowledge, it is clear that Descartes takes certainty to play an important role. As I noted above, just what kind of certainty, whether epistemic or merely psychological, is a matter of some debate.[6] I suggested that, in light of Descartes's commitment to the correspondence theory of truth, and his broader aim to "establish anything at all in the sciences that stable

[6] For an excellent overview of this distinction, see (Van Cleve, Foundationalism, Epistemic Principles, and the Cartesian Circle 1979) and (Reed 2011). In section IV of his paper, Van Cleve provides a defense of "Descartes's high standards" of certainty as requiring "*maximal evidence* and *truth.* Cf. (Frankfurt, Memory and the Cartesain Circle 1962) and (Gewirth 1941). See also, (Della Rocca 2005). Della Rocca defends the view that Descartes believed that during instances of *cognitio,* finite minds possessed "normative certainty" which is a "kind of knowledge that entails truth" (p.4).

and likely to last"[7] commit him to the stronger, non-psychological sense of certainty. I will return to this discussion later in the chapter. For now, I want to emphasize a distinction between two different ways that Descartes refers to *knowledge* in his writings. The quotation above from the second sentence in the *First Meditation* is important in illustrating this distinction; the original Latin reads, "si quid aliqando firmum & mansurum cupiam in *scientiis* stabilire…" The operative term here, *scientiis*, is most often translated as "sciences," and to a contemporary reader this makes quite a bit of sense. After all, Descartes himself was greatly concerned with what we today think of as physics and astronomy. During Descartes's time, however, there was no such distinction between "science" and the general pursuit of systematic knowledge. When approaching the *Meditations*, then, we should consider this passage as referring to the broader category of *systematic knowledge*, rather than the more narrow contemporary understanding of natural science.

Noting that Descartes is perhaps not specifically referring to physics in the opening lines is important because, as I noted above, present within Descartes's writings are two different ways in which Descartes refers to *knowledge*.[8] The first is, as I noted above, *scientia* and its cognates, the other is *cognitio* and its cognates. There is an enormous literature concerning the distinction between the two terms and the role each plays in the Cartesian system, and I will not here provide a thorough survey of all of the interpretive strategies or difficulties. Instead I will note a few (relatively) uncontroversial differences between the two and flag some interpretive issues that arise as a result of them.

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[7] *First Meditation* (CSM I, p. 12).

[8] It is worth noting that I do not take issue with the translation of "scientiis" as "sciences." I think that there is some reason to think that something like "science" in the sense we understand it today is the right translation (and interpretation) of what Descartes was aiming for in *The Meditations*. In 1640, just prior to the publication of *The Meditations*, Descartes wrote to Mersenne that, "…my little book on metaphysics contains all the principles of my physics" (CSMK, p. 157). Yet, there is also very good reason to think that Descartes meant systematic knowledge in the broader sense. I will not here defend any particular interpretation of that passage. For excellent exposition of the ways in which *The Meditations* "contain" Cartesian physics, see especially: (Garber 1986); and (Garber, Descartes' Metaphysical Physics 1992). Cf. (Lachterman 1986) and (Gaukroger 1995) esp. p. 338.

Within the Descartes's writing we find various mentions of *scientia* as referring to a stable, systematic kind of knowledge, and it is relatively uncontroversial that Descartes thinks that knowledge of God's true nature is a prerequisite for this kind of knowledge. For instance, in the *Third Meditation* the meditator says, "But in order to remove even this slight reason for doubt, as soon as the opportunity arises I must examine whether there is a God and if there is, whether he can be a deceiver. For if I do not know this, it seems that I can never be quite certain about anything else."[9] Yet, in the *Second Replies,* Descartes draws the distinction between *scientia,* as a systematic, stable, form of knowledge, and *cognitio* as a single act of awareness. The reason that Descartes introduces this distinction here is because Mersenne had pressed him to explain whether an atheist might have knowledge of some particular mathematical truth. He says, "The fact that an atheist can be 'clearly aware [*cognoscere*] that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles' is something I do not dispute. But I maintain that this awareness [*cognitionem*] of his is not true knowledge [*scientiam*], since no act of awareness [*cognitio*] that can be rendered doubtful seems to fit to be called knowledge [*scientia*]."[10]

While it is tempting to read this passage as denying *any* knowledge to the atheist geometer, there is some reason to think that this is not Descartes's aim, and that *cognitio* is a type of knowledge, even if it is not the end point of the Cartesian epistemological project. In both the *Second* and *Third Meditations*, the meditator appeals to moments of awareness, which are extraordinarily compelling, and which in the end Descartes takes to be true. The most obvious example is the *cogito*, which Descartes considers "the first and most certain" piece

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[9] *Third meditation* (CSM II, p. 25). See also, *Fifth Meditation*, "And what is more, I see that the certainty of all other things depends on this, so that without [certain knowledge of God] nothing can ever be perfectly known [*perfecte scirri*]" (CSM II, p. 48) and *The Search for Truth*, "Indeed just such fears [of following the method of doubt] have prevented most men of letters from acquiring a body of knowledge which was firm and certain enough to deserve the name 'science'" (CSM II, p. 408).

[10] *Second Replies* (CSM II, p. 101).

(or item) of knowledge [*cognitione*].[11] For as long as the meditator considers herself, she is aware that she is a thing that exists.[12] I will return to the *cogito* in the next section, for now it is worth noting that Descartes sees this as an important piece of knowledge, and that he considers it *cognitio,* just as he does the atheist geometer's awareness of mathematical principles. In the *Third Meditation*, the meditator appeals to an unshakable awareness of certain causal principles, such as "something cannot come from nothing" or "there is at least as much reality in the cause as in the effect" and an awareness of simple mathematical truths such as 2+3=5. While attending to the facts themselves, the meditator finds it impossible to consider them false, "Yet when I turn to the things themselves which I think I perceive very clearly, I am so convinced by them that I spontaneously declare: let whoever can do so deceive me, he will never bring it about that I am nothing, so long as I continue to think I am something… or anything of this kind in which I see a manifest contradiction."[13] What the meditator seems to be implying here is that, as long as she actively considers these propositions, it is impossible to doubt their veracity. Still, she does go on to note that, when she moves on and considers *another* idea (viz. the idea of an omnipotent being), it becomes clear that such a being could have created her with a faulty cognitive faculty—this raises a "very slight and, so to speak, metaphysical" doubt in her mind. That the meditator's doubt regarding the veracity of these propositions is only possible when she stops explicitly attending to them sheds some light on how Descartes understood the role of *cognitio* in his system. He seems to think that *cognitio* (awareness, or knowledge) is an important tool that

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[11] *Principles* I.7 (CSM I, p. 195), and *Third Meditation* (CSM II, p. 24).

[12] Even this belief, the belief in the self, can be open to doubt it seems. If one has a materially false idea of the self, or is confused in some other way, one may well believe that she does not exist. For a full defense of this line of reasoning, see (Cunning, Descartes on the Dubitability of the Self 2007). This view is contentious, however. For a defense of the view that under no circumstances can the existence of the self be doubted, see (Broughton 2008).

[13] *Third Meditation* (CSM II, p. 25).

provides important insight into the world, not merely human psychology.[14] Descartes echoes this in his *Conversation with Burman*, he says that the meditator, "does use such axioms in the proof [for the existence of God], but he knows that he is not deceived with regard to them, since he is actually paying attention to them. And for as long as he does pay attention to them, he is certain that he is not being deceived, and he is compelled to give his assent to them."[15]

It seems, then, that in the case of the atheist geometer, she has some kind of awareness of the truth of, say, the Pythagorean theorem *as long as* she attends to the demonstration. Without a divine guarantee, however, there is always the lingering possibility that she could later think herself deceived in some way, or that she could come to think that she was mistaken in her belief. Since finite minds cannot *always* attend to demonstrations or clearly and distinctly perceive the truth of axioms when engaging in applied projects in physics, for example, then the atheist is at a notable disadvantage when it comes to moving beyond discreet instances of rational insight. Still, "The theist has *no* advantage over the atheist at the time each enjoys a clear and distinct perception. Rather, the theist's advantage lies in the fact that, armed with the certainty that a non-deceiving God exists, she will *always* remain free from doubt."[16]

Some scholars have argued that *cognitio* serves as a "first-order knowledge," or knowledge that fulfills the role of the foundational beliefs within Cartesian epistemology,

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[14] (Carriero 2008). Cf. Della Rocca, (2005).

[15] *Conversation with Burman* (CSMK, p. 334).

[16] (Reed 2011). (Della Rocca 2005) makes a similar argument, "At these later times [when not attending to the clear and distinct perception], we are not normatively certain of the claim in question, though we were normatively certain of it earlier. It is because we do not have normative certainty of the claim after we perceive it clearly and distinctly that Descartes says that our apprehension of this claim is not yet *scientia*, an awareness that is not vulnerable even to retrospective reasons for doubt. It is for the same reason that, for Descartes, an atheist… can never achieve *scientia*" (p. 12).

while *scientia* is "second-order" knowledge that removes doubt from general principles concerning the functioning of the finite cognitive system and paves the way for science.[17] Others argue that *cognitio* is a form of non-reflective, intuitive knowledge, while *scientia* is a more carefully reasoned, reflective knowledge.[18] Tied to these considerations is the question regarding whether or not an instance of *cognitio* supplies defeasible beliefs. Descartes is unequivocal regarding the impossibility of doubting such beliefs, *while attending* to them. So it must be the case that if these judgments are defeasible, they are only indirectly defeasible. Below I will return to the defeasibility of rationally intuited beliefs, but for now it is worth noting that while attending to them, their truth cannot be doubted.

Whether defeasible or not, I will suppose that *cognitio* counts among the highest forms of knowledge. What *cognitio* and *scientia* have in common is their indubitability. Yet, *sceintia* involves more than indubitability while occurrently considering the idea. For Descartes, *scientia* involves absolute indubitability, but requires more than just a single piece of indubitable apprehension. *Scientia* is, for Descartes, systematic indubitability that can only be grounded by recognizing that God is in no way a deceiver. While the atheist geometer could, in principle train herself to have a persistent occurrent apprehension of some mathematical truth, she will never achieve *scientia* this way. Despite the indefeasibility of her belief, it remains a single idea and *scientia* is essentially systematic. One piece of knowledge does not a system make. Despite Descartes's interest in *scientia*, *cognitio* plays a critical role in grounding systematic knowledge, and as such counts among the highest form of knowledge. Insofar as we are concerned with determining how finite beings can *have* knowledge (or *know* that they have knowledge), it would be nice if there were some criterion that we might use to help determine which judgments are true and which are false; which instances of awareness

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[17] See (Schmit 1986). Cf. (Kenny, Descartes: a Study of His Philosophy 1968), and (Carriero 2008).

[18] See (Sosa 1997).

count as *cognitio* and which are merely confused, yet deeply held beliefs. Fortunately for us, Descartes does provide us with such a criterion. Those judgments that are clear and distinct count as knowledge. Descartes "uses 'knowledge' [*cognitio*] language in two different contexts of clear and distinct judgments: the less rigorous context includes defeasible judgments, as in the case of the atheist geometer (who can't block hyperbolic doubt); the more rigorous and systematic context requires indefeasible judgments, as with the brand of Knowledge sought after in the *Meditations*."[19] For my purposes, I will limit my discussion to *cognitio* in this chapter, as I am concerned with particular instances of clearly and distinctly understood truths. As such I can circumvent many of the interpretive troubles that accompany the distinction between modes, kinds, or levels of knowledge.

Clear and Distinct Ideas

I have argued that in some cases, there is knowledge of the truth of some fact and that this direct apprehension enjoys normative or epistemic certainty. I will later argue that these instances help us move from the Cartesian confines of the finite mind to the world as it actually is. Still there is work to be done in determining which ideas will properly count as enjoying this normative certainty. There is little doubt that Descartes considered the clarity and distinctness of an idea to be relevant to the finite mind's determination regarding the truth of that idea (or the existence of the object of the idea). Consider the infamous "truth rule" set out by Descartes's meditator in the *Third Meditation*, "So I now seem to be able to lay it down as a general rule that whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true."[20] Compare that passage to these two passages from the *Fourth Meditation*,

> If, however, I simply refrain from making a judgment in cases where I do not perceive the truth with sufficient clarity and

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[19] (Newman, Descartes' Epistemology 2010).

[20] *Third Meditation* (CSM II, p. 24).

> distinctness, then it is clear that I am behaving correctly and avoiding error.[21]
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> The cause of error must surely be the one I have explained; for if, whenever I have to make a judgment, I restrain may will so that it extends to what the intellect clearly and distinctly reveals, and no further, then it is quite impossible for me to go wrong.[22]

These passages make clear that there is a critical connection between an idea's being clear and distinct, and the truth of that idea (or the conformity of reality to the idea). Despite the force with which Descartes's meditator puts forth this conclusion, it is not clear how it is that finite beings come to know that ideas possess these features, or why it is that they are indeed true. In fact, there is even little agreement about how it is that finite beings can differentiate ideas that merely *seem* to be clear and distinct from those that actually are.[23]

In the *Meditations*, Descartes offers a number of examples of ideas that he considers to be clear and distinct. But before addressing the difficulty of distinguishing ideas that possess these qualities from those that do not on the basis of these examples, we should see what Descartes says about the qualities themselves. In *Principles* I.45, Descartes offers definitions of both clarity and distinctness.

> A perception which can serve as the basis of a certain and indubitable judgment needs to be not merely clear but also distinct. I call a perception 'clear' when it is present and accessible to the attentive mind – just as we say that we see something clearly when it is present to the eye's gaze and stimulates it with a sufficient degree of strength and accessibility. I call a perception 'distinct' if, as well as being clear, it is so sharply separated from all other perceptions that it contains within itself only what is clear.[24]

Descartes informs us that the clarity of an idea is not unlike the clarity of a sense perceptual experience, a metaphor that is only moderately helpful. What is important to note, however,

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[21] *Fourth Meditation* (CSM II, p. 41).

[22] *Fourth Meditation* (CSM II, p. 43).

[23] See, for example, Arnauld, *Fourth Objections* (CSM II, p. 141-143).

[24] *Principles,* I.45 (CSM I, p. 207-8).

is the connection between clarity and distinctness. Descartes states that an idea is distinct only if it is also clear. To wit, one cannot have a distinct idea that fails to be clear. One can, however, have clear ideas that fail to be distinct. In *Principles* I.46, Descartes provides as an example of a clear idea that fails to be distinct, pain. He says that when one experiences an intense pain, the sensation is quite clearly experienced and understood, but such an idea is not always properly distinct. Many times, Descartes maintains, the subject experiencing the pain confuses the experience of pain (which is a mode of the soul alone) for being an experience in a particular location on the body. But the "judgment they make concerning the nature of something which they think exists in the painful spot" is "obscure" and ultimately confused.[25] Regardless of the person's failure to distinguish the pain *qua* mode of the soul from the idea of the body that is its proximate cause, the experience of the intense pain is still crystal clear. In light of this example, we might say that what makes an idea distinct is that the content of the idea is clear "to an open mind" and contains nothing that is not *entailed* by the simple components of the content—"an idea is *distinct* just in case its elements belong to members of [the set of modes of extension] or [the set of modes of thought], but not to both. Otherwise, an idea is confused—literally, its elements are 'mixed together.'"[26] That is, in the case of pain, what makes the idea clear, but obscure (i.e. not distinct) is that the experience is fully intelligible to the mind, but we mistakenly judge an unknown element (in this case the body and/or mind-body relation) to be a *constitutive* part of the experience. Since we include in our idea of the pain something that is unknown or inessential (in this case, the body), the idea is clear but obscure. In other words, in a clear (but not distinct) perception, the finite mind can tell apart the contents or elements of the perception, but still

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[25] *Principles* I.46 (CSM I, p. 208); cf. *Principles* I.67 (CSM I, p. 216-7), titled, "We frequently make mistakes, even in our judgments concerning pain." In the *Second Replies* Descartes explains that a conception is "obscure or confused" when "it contains some element of which we are ignorant" (CSM II, p. 105).

[26] (Smith 2001) p. 288-9.

confusedly judges some elements to be conjoined that in reality are not. This serves to explain why it is that Descartes thinks that in order to serve as the basis for an indubitable judgment the idea must be both clear *and* distinct.

Still, with the definitions of clarity and distinctness and the example of pain in hand, grasping what the nature of clear and distinct ideas really is supposed to be is not an easy task. Unsurprisingly, this problem came up several times in the published *Objections* to the *Meditations*.[27] In the *Second Replies*, Descartes suggests that readers who struggle with what makes an idea clear and distinct, rather than confused and obscure should,

> …ponder on all the examples that I went through in my *Meditations*, both of clear and distinct perception and of obscure and confused perception, and thereby accustom themselves to distinguishing what is clearly known from what is obscure. This is something that is easier to learn by examples than by rules, and I think that in the *Meditations* I explained, or at least touched on, all the relevant examples.[28]

While there is certainly insufficient space here to consider every example that is brought up in the *Meditations*, we can consider a few of them and try to suss out what it is that makes an idea clear and distinct. Before engaging in this process, however, there is one more feature of the idea of pain that is worth noting, and that is how compelling the idea is. Descartes claims, in the *Principles of Philosophy*, that the mind has only two modes of thinking: "the perception of the intellect and the operation of the will."[29] Descartes continues clarifying that 'perception' is a catch-all term used to pick out mental activity such as sense perception,

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[27] Arnauld, *Fourth Objections* (CSM II, p. 141-143).

[28] *Second Replies* (CSM II. p. 116).

[29] *Principles* I.32 (CSM I, p. 204). In the *Third Meditation*, Descartes illustrates this point again writing, "Some of my thoughts are as it were the images of things, and it is only in these cases that the term 'idea' is strictly appropriate – for example, when I think of a man, or a chimera, or the sky, or an angel, or God. Other thoughts have various additional forms: thus when I will, or am afraid, or affirm, or deny, there is always a particular thing which I take as the object of my thought, but my thought includes something more than the likeness of that thing. Some thoughts in this category are called volitions or emotions, while others are called judgments." (CSM II, p. 25-6).

imagination and understanding—in a word, ideas. Meanwhile, the will encompasses judgment responses to the content of ideas, value judgments and truth-evaluation of ideas put forth by the intellect. It is the will that is compelled when presented with a clear and distinct idea. In what does this compulsion consist? While in pain, one does not often reflect on her perception at a higher level (or at least, *I* do not reflect on *my* experience of pain, rather I just *have* it), but if one were to consider the idea abstractly, one might find that the will is unable to consider that the experience of pain is not actually occurring. That is, when one is experiencing excruciating pain, she cannot doubt it. To put this in properly Cartesian terms, the intellect provides the will with a mental perception the content of which is a modification of the soul (in this case, a pain experience). The will is then moved to react. If the perceiver were to reflect on the experience of pain and her intellect presented to her will the proposition, "I am feeling an intense pain right now," the will would not hesitate to affirm the truth of that proposition.

It is worthwhile to consider one further example. Perhaps the most obvious example of an idea that is taken to be clear and distinct in Descartes's work is the *Second Meditation*'s Archimedean "firm and immovable point,"[30] the *cogito*. In the face of the possibility of an evil demon so powerful that even logic, simple arithmetic, and those truths she took to be most evident are open to doubt, the meditator locates one self-evident truth, that so long as she considers it, "must finally conclude that this proposition, *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind."[31] There are a few important features to notice immediately. First, notice that the proposition that Descartes's meditator finds must always be true (as long as it is considered) is not the product of an extended

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[30] At the outset of the *Second Meditation*, Descartes's meditator finds herself in a position analogous to Archimedes. Descartes writes, "Archimedes used to demand just one firm and immovable point in order to shift the entire earth; so I too can hope for great things if I manage to find just one thing, however slight, that is certain and unshakable." (CSM II, p. 16).

[31] *Second Meditation* (CSM II, p. 17); cf. *Discourse on Method* (CSM I, p. 127).

process of reasoning. Given the nature of the evil genius doubt that concluded the *First Meditation*, it is at least epistemically possible that the rules of logic and simple arithmetic are false. That is, if Descartes's meditator were to offer a *traditional* syllogism in defense of the existence of the self during the duration of a particular thought, then there would remain a problem. There is a great deal of debate concerning whether or not Descartes's "first item of knowledge" involves *any* inferential structure. While I will not here weigh in on that debate, it is worth noting that, regardless of whether or not the *cogito* itself involves *an* inference, it is clear that such an inference both is not and *cannot* be structured by way of an Aristotelian syllogism. It is clear that Descartes cannot and does not rely on a syllogism in the Aristotelian sense because such an extended series of inferences is open to question in light of the possibility of having been created with a faulty cognitive faculty.[32] In this case, however, there is no Aristotelian syllogism present, only the recognition that as long as there is a thought with a specific subjective characteristic, there must be a subject to have it (even if the *nature* of that subject is yet to be established).[33] Also worth noting, specifically for my broader project, is the modal operator present in conjunction with the meditator's proclamation—that it is *necessarily* true whenever it is considered.

So the subjective character of the perception of the self introduces not only epistemic indubitability (at least while the proposition is explicitly considered[34]), but also

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[32] See *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, Rule Three where Descartes says, "Hence we are distinguishing mental intuition from certain deduction on the grounds that we are aware of a movement or a sort of sequence in the latter but not in the former, and also because immediate self-evidence is not required for deduction, as it is for intuition; deduction in a sense gets its certainty from memory" (CSM I, p. 15).

[33] For an account of how the *cogito* does involve an inference see, (Markie 1992), (Katz 1987), (Hintikka 1962). For an account of the *cogito* as a merely self-evident intuition (not involving an inference) see, (Kenny, Descartes: a Study of His Philosophy 1968). For two decidedly different approaches to establishing that this debate can be circumvented, see (Newman 2010), and (Cunning, Argument and Persuasion in Descartes's Meditations 2010) p. 74-5.

[34] For an account of how even the existence of the self can be doubted see, (Cunning, Descartes on the Dubitability of the Self 2007).

what at this point must be epistemic *necessity*, though it certainly appears to be stronger. Just how to make sense of the modal status of the necessity present in this situation will have to wait, but for now it is worth noticing. While it may be tempting to consider this passage as informative regarding finite beings' knowledge of necessity generally, it is important to keep in mind that at this point in the discovery process, an all powerful God is simply not even in play. To draw any conclusions about Descartes's considered view on necessity is by what his meditator says in the *Second Meditation* is to put Descartes before the horse. What is more important for our purposes is the status of this idea as clear and distinct. But what makes it clear and distinct? Before we can answer this question, we need to establish the content of the idea and how it is that we come to know it. I said above that in light of the hyperbolic evil demon doubt that the idea cannot have come from an argument. Descartes makes the same point himself in the *Second Replies*.

> And when we become aware that we are thinking things, this is a primary notion which is not derived by means of any syllogism. When someone says, 'I am thinking therefore I am, or I exist', he does not deduce existence from thought by means of a syllogism, but recognizes it as something self-evident by a *simple* intuition of the mind. This is clear from the fact that if he were deducing it by means of a syllogism, he would have to have had previous knowledge of the major premiss 'Everything which thinks is, or exists'; yet in fact he learns it from experiencing in his own case that it is impossible that he should think without existing. It is in the nature of our mind to construct general propositions on the basis of our knowledge of particular ones.[35]

Since there is no extended series of inferences involved in the "simple intuition of the mind" that guarantees the existence of the self, the simplicity of the idea may help us garner a better understanding of the notions of clarity and distinctness.

Descartes's definition of clarity is intuitive in the case of the self—that is, there is nothing particularly mysterious or cloudy (so to speak) about the list of attributes Descartes's meditator notices about herself. The clarity of the perception of the self is made more

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35 *Second Replies* (CSM II, p. 100), emphasis added.

evident by focusing on these examples (understanding, doubting, affirming, etc.). How the idea is *distinct*, however, is not as obvious, or dare I say, clear. We can notice, in light of Descartes's definition of the distinctness of an idea, that Descartes's meditator takes care not to include in contemplating the idea of herself anything that is open to doubt—anything that is not essentially connected to (or, in this case, *inseparable from*) the nature of thought. Indeed even when Descartes's meditator allows her imagination to have "completely free rein" and to consider the nature of what appear to be real things (in this case sensory perceptions of a piece of wax, as I will discuss below), she determines only that she better knows her own mind than anything corporeal. Of course, the reason for this is that the existence of such things, *as independent of the mind*, is still open to doubt. What is not open to doubt is the idea of the self, and that idea contains only that which cannot be doubted. In this way, the content of the idea is *distinguished* from other ideas that the meditator finds herself considering, such as extension, divisibility, number, and other so-called "primary qualities" of corporeal bodies.

One mark of the clarity and distinctness of ideas seems to be the indubitability of the *truth* of the idea (or the conformity of reality to the idea). Still, as Descartes's Meditator, and many of his interlocutors continually point out, there are many things that we used to believe, and perhaps still do, that we merely *seem(ed)* to think were inconceivable, obviously true, or even clear and distinct that nevertheless turned out to be just the opposite. To put this worry bluntly, Descartes seems to be suggesting that the close connection between ideas (for instance, the self and thought, or intellection and thought) plays an important role in determining the truth of certain ideas. Yet, the objection that the meditator is herself aware of is that there seems to be a "tightness of connection" between ideas, and then there is the "TIGHTNESS OF CONNECTION," where the latter entails the truth of the connection, while the former provides something like a confused type psychological compulsion. If Descartes is going to rely on clarity and distinctness as our guide to discerning the

"TIGHTNESS OF CONNECTION" between ideas, we need a better idea of what it is that he is talking about.

Simple Ideas and Separability

The notion of the clarity of an idea is relatively straight forward, especially when you consider the examples of the experience of pain, and of the self. Yet, there is something more to be said about how it is that one can be sure that the idea of the self is *actually* distinct from other ideas, while the idea of pain is sometimes not. In an attempt to make clear what makes an idea distinct, I will now take what might appear at first to be a slight detour. In the end, however, I think that this will help us work out what makes an idea distinct and what makes an idea confused. Given that Descartes, and his often confused meditator, accept the correspondence theory of truth, Descartes is going to try to exhibit first-hand which ideas are those that we cannot doubt conform to reality. In the *First Meditation*, Descartes offers an analogy to a painter immediately following his discussion of the dream argument. His meditator says,

> Nonetheless, it must surely be admitted that the visions which come in sleep are like paintings, which must have been fashioned in the likeness of things that are real, and hence that at least these general kinds of things – eyes, head, hands and the body as a whole – are things which are not imaginary but are real and exist. For even when painters try to create sirens and satyrs with the most extraordinary bodies, they cannot give them natures which are new in all respects; they simply jumble up the limbs of different animals. Or if perhaps they manage to think up something so new that nothing remotely similar has ever been seen before – something which is therefore completely fictitious and unreal – at least the colours used in the composition must be real. By similar reasoning, although these general kinds of things – eyes, head, hands and so on – could be imaginary, it must at least be admitted that certain other even simpler and more universal things are real. These are as it were the real colours from which we form the images of things, whether true or false, that occur in our thought.[36]

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36 *First Meditation* (CSM II, p. 13-14).

There are a number of important issues at play in this passage that I will not be addressing in depth, as to offer a full exposition of the passage and its context within the *First Meditation* is well beyond the scope of this chapter. As it is early in the *Meditations*, there are a few points that will later be taken back (for example, the implication that colors might be the basic constituents of our ideas), but what is important for my purposes here is to note that the structure of the analogy mirrors the method set out in his earlier work *The Rules for the Direction of the Mind*. In the *Rule Four*, Descartes begins a discussion of a method that he thinks should be used "to investigate the truth of things" that differs in an important way from those before him.[37] In *Rule Five*, Descartes argues that we must take complex propositions, and break them down to their ultimate constituents, to those ideas that are themselves basic and knowable in themselves through a self-evident intuition. Once we have done this, i.e. established a foundation of ideas that are certain and simple, we can "ascend through the same steps to knowledge of the rest."[38] In his elaboration of *Rule Six*, Descartes is careful to point out that the number of properly simple things the nature of which can be known by intuition is in fact quite small, and that prior to engaging in an attempt to answer any "specific problems, we ought first to make a random selection of truths which happen to be at hand, and ought to see whether we can deduce some other truths by them step by step, and from these still others and so on in logical sequence."[39]

Of course, what we are looking for here is not the idea that Descartes sought infallible knowledge to serve as a foundation upon which to build a new scientific worldview, but rather an elaboration of the method for discerning what features these ideas possess beyond being "clear and distinct." If we consider the discussion of method found in

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[37] *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* (CSM I, p. 15-20).

[38] *Rules, Rule Five* (CSM I, p. 20).

[39] (CSM I, p. 23).

the early passages from the *Rules* when looking at the painter analogy in the *First Meditation*, we see that the simplicity of an idea plays an important role in allowing us to discern the nature of the content of the idea. While the painter passage seems to be agnostic about those ideas that are actually simple (whether they're colors, shapes, extension or otherwise), one thing is clear—Descartes's meditator is trying to isolate the most basic ideas in accord with the Cartesian method.[40] Once we have arrived at simple ideas we are finally in a position to determine what follows from them, and what does not. Indeed one key motivation for seeking simple ideas, if we take Descartes's discussion from the *Rules* seriously, is that when we break complex ideas down to simple constituents, we are in a position to better understand what is actually essential to those concepts.

But what makes an idea simple? Kurt Smith offers an excellent explication,

> Simplicity, for instance, is epistemologically relative. A and B are simple in respect to some thing C just in case our knowledge of C requires our knowledge of A and B. The simple natures are "simple" in the sense that "they cannot be divided by the mind into others which are more distinctly known" (AT, X, pp. 418-19; CSM, I, p. 44). This does not preclude our dividing A and B further. Rather, the point is that, even though A and B could undergo further analysis, if, in respect to our knowledge of C such an analysis would not result in producing entities that are more distinctly known than A and B, then A and B are regarded as simple in respect to C.[41]

Some of the clearest examples of simple ideas that still involve unpacking despite antecedent distinctness are geometric figures. Consider the triangle. In the *Fifth Meditation,* Descartes refers to this as possessing a "true and immutable nature,"[42] yet it is easy to see that, despite understanding everything that makes a triangle what it is, there is still unpacking to be done in terms of the atomic constituents. For instance, we might recognize that a triangle involves

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[40] For a discussion of *why* Descartes leaves open to interpretation what the simples are at this point in the *Meditations*, see (Cunning, Argument and Persuasion in Descartes's Meditations 2010), specifically Chapter 2 p. 56-59.

[41] (Smith 2001), p. 287.

[42] (CSM II, p. 44).

the concepts: angle, line, three, and so forth. Still each of these concepts may be cashed out further in terms of analysis—the line can be broken down into points, etc. Yet, the figure of a triangle itself is sufficiently simple for the finite mind to grasp and know (*cognitio*) without further work. To put this point another way, there is a relation of logical entailment between the triangle and the line, between the number three and the triangle and so forth. This is our "TIGHTNESS OF CONNECTION." The actual tightness, in the strong sense, is a logical entailment.

To even the casual reader of the *Meditations* this should sound familiar, indeed this is what Descartes's meditator does in the *Second Meditation*. After coming to recognize that whenever she thinks "I am, I exist" it must be the case that she does in fact exist, the meditator engages in the process of determining to what the idea of "I" refers. That is, she engages in the process of analysis in order to determine what belongs essentially to the self. The meditator has, at this early point, a *clear* idea of herself, but it is not yet *distinct*. A large portion of the process of making the idea distinct is done by eliminating those features that seem naturally to belong to the idea of the self, but that are actually not *contained* (or ineliminably bound) within the concept. The meditator begins with the suggestion that she might be a "rational animal," but notices that such ideas are themselves in need of analysis in order to grasp them at all, "for then I should have to inquire what an animal is, and what rationality is, and in this way one question would lead me down the slope to other harder ones, and I do not now have time to waste time on subtleties of this kind."[43] Unlike the example of the constituents of the triangle, the finite mind does not grasp the essential nature of an animal *without* further analysis; i.e. merely because further analysis is *possible,* in the case of the line, the angle, or the number three, understanding these examples does not *require* further analysis. After considering some of the features that Aristotelians generally

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[43] *Second Meditation* (CSM II, p. 17).

attributed to the soul, such as nourishment, locomotion, and sensation, the mediator notices that none of these things, at least conceived as corporeal, was essential to the thing that exists. What is essential is thought.

None of this is, of course, surprising or novel. What this familiar discussion illustrates, however, is important. It illustrates that the simple idea of the self, as an existing thing *contains,* in a sense, certain other ideas, and is utterly separable from others.[44] Bennett makes the concept-containment view the cornerstone for Cartesian necessity, and his core insight is an important one. There are certain ideas that finite minds have that are inseparably bound to other ideas, and by coming to know which ideas stand in such inseparability relations to one another finite beings can account for necessity. This notion of necessity, while not getting us from our minds to the world, still serves an important feature in understanding what makes an idea appropriately distinct. Only those other ideas that are inseparable from, or contained within simple notions are essential to the idea. Consider again the discussion of pain from above in conjunction with the *Second Meditation* discussion of the nature of the self. Once the meditator comes to have a proper understanding of the self as a non-physical being (she says, "I am not that structure of limbs which is called a human body. I am not even some thin vapour which permeates the limbs…for these are things which I have supposed to be nothing. Let this supposition stand, for all that I am still something"[45]), she recognizes that the experience of pain does not in any way require the real existence of a body. The pain itself is merely a mode of the immaterial soul, and thus properly understood,

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[44] One might be tempted to object that if the concept of the self 'contains' other ideas in this way, then the idea of the self is not properly 'simple.' This is objection misses the mark. Part of what makes these ideas simple in the Cartesian sense is not necessarily that they are primitive and lacking in richness or parts. Rather, what makes them simple is that "unlike the conclusions of arguments, it is within our capability to clearly and distinctly perceive them without perceiving anything else—for example, premises from which they are inferred" (Cunning, Argument and Persuasion in Descartes's Meditations 2010 p. 72). See also (Smith 2001), p. 288, and *Second Replies* (CSM II, p. 104).

[45] (CSM II, p. 18).

the experience of pain has a separate or distinct existence from the cause of the experience, whatever that turns out to be. This point too, is uncontroversial, but what it makes clear is how we can be correct when we claim that an idea is distinct. The idea is properly distinct when all of those features that are conceptually distinguish*able* from the idea have been removed from it.

In sticking with Descartes's preferred style of elucidating the notions of clarity and distinctness, we should consider again the examples of pain and the triangle. The example of the triangle can be instructive when explaining what distinguishes the clear-but-confused idea of a pain from the clear and distinct idea of pain. Above I noted that when clearly aware of the nature of the triangle, there is an awareness of the entailment relations between important constituent ideas and simple ideas (which can count as contents of rationally intuited knowledge). So in the instance of the experience of pain, what might serve as making it clear is that the *feeling* is an unanalyzable simple. There are no constituent parts into which the feeling can be further analyzed. Yet, while we have a clear idea of what *pain* is, we can still have a confused understanding of the pain as existing *in some place*, rather than as a mode of thought alone. Just as the meditator had with the first recognition of the self, there is here some unpacking to do with regard to the pain. There are certain features that logically entail each of the two different, incommensurate, Cartesian finite substances. With careful attention, the finite mind can recognize the principle attribute of each substance and "enumerate" what modes logically entail each substance.[46]

When we recognize that the principle attribute of matter is extension, then we are in a position to enumerate, according to Descartes, features of matter that are appropriately bound to that substance. For instance, on the Cartesian picture, spatial location entails

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[46] This discussion mirrors (Smith 2001). The discussion of enumeration is pulled from *Rule Seven* of the *Regulae* (CSM I, p. 26), and Descartes discusses the distinction between finite substances in *Principles* I.51-53 (CSM I. p. 210-11).

extension, motion entails extension, shape entails extension and so on. Alternatively, operations of the intellect or will entail thought; ideas entail thinking, judgments entail thinking, sensations entail thinking. It is here that we find the reason that the experience of pain, *as spatially located*, is clear but confused. Since matter is essentially extended, and a spatial location entails extension alone, the clear *experience* of pain (itself entailing thought alone) appears to be "mixed together" with something not only inessential to the idea (extension), but of an entirely different nature.[47] Matter does not think on the Cartesian picture, so any idea that seeks to identify thought in such a subject is *necessarily* confused—even if the content is clearly apprehended. Thus in the case of pain, the finite being can have either a clear and distinct idea of pain, or a clear but confused idea. The clear and distinct idea involves noticing that the *experience* of pain is TIGHTLY (read: logically) tied to thought *and not body*. The confused idea of pain involves noticing and being aware of the pain, but illicitly "mixing together" features that are of an inconsistent nature (in this case, body). This parallels nicely the discussion of the triangle above in a few ways. First, the discussion helps illustrate how it can be that there is a difference between the confused meditator's understanding of the tightness of connection and the properly Cartesian TIGHTNESS OF CONNECTION in terms of clarity and distinctness. That is, the confused meditator does not yet fully grasp the *real* distinction between mind and body, and thus is likely inclined to see pain as the kind of thing that, when experienced, is spatially located. Yet, the Cartesian recognizes that there is a *logical* connection between the *experience of pain* and thought, just as there is a logical connection between the triangle and the line.[48] Second, the example of the

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[47] I borrow the phrase "mixed together" from (Smith 2001). He states that Descartes himself identifies ideas that fail to be distinct in this way. "The word that Descartes uses is "confusio," which literally means 'mixed together.'" (note 18).

[48] In Chapter Four, I will return to the connection, and distinction between mind and body. I think that it helps illustrate the ways in which, on the Cartesian picture, finite beings can have a rational intuition concerning modal facts. In the case of the mind-body distinction *and* union, I will argue, rational intuition plays an important role, but like any other case, does not get us very far.

triangle can serve as a direct parallel for the clear but confused idea of pain. Exactly what counts as the truth-makers for truths about geometric figures is unclear, but they do not seem to appear (at least, in the idealized form) in physical matter.[49] Below I will argue that Descartes must remain quiet about what *does* serve as the truth-makers for *some* truths (including causal maxims, arithmetical truths, and a few important others), but for now it is worth nothing that the external world does not obviously fit for them all. The reason that this is worth noting, is that just as with the notion of pain, the finite mind can include in a consideration of a geometrical figure "a confused representation of some figure" which attaches to it "body and looks at something in the body which conforms to an idea understood by the mind or perceived by the senses."[50] Just as in the case of the body, when representing the triangle as if it were an actually extended, corporeal figure, the finite mind holds a clear, but confused idea.

The above discussion serves to help us clarify what counts as a distinct idea, and clarifies what connections between ideas count as being appropriately tight—those that are logically tied together. "An idea is distinct just in case its elements belong to members of [the set of modes of extension] or [the set of modes of thought], but not to both. Otherwise, an idea is confused— literally, its elements are "mixed together."[51] What all of this serves to do, then is set the stage for how the theological mysterian reading of Descartes can resolve some of the problems that face the universal possibilist, limited possibilist, and reductivist

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[49] Descartes offers a discussion of that the awareness of geometric facts cannot be awareness of a body at that outset of the *Sixth Meditation,* (CSM II, p. 50-51). (Frankfurt, Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths 1977) and (Bennett 1994) maintain the conceptualist approach—that the truth makers are nothing more than the concepts located in finite minds. Marleen Rozemond maintains that Descartes held the truth-makers to be the objective reality of God's decrees (Rosemond 2008). Cf. (Schmaltz 1991). For an account of physical body as truth-maker for geometric truths, see (Cunning, Fifth Meditation TINs Revisited: A Reply to Criticism of the Epistemic Interpretation 2008).

[50] *Sixth Meditation* (CSM II, p. 50-51).

[51] (Smith 2001), p. 288-9.

positions. On my view, there is still Truth in the Cartesian system, and it is not merely found in conceptual relations. There are facts about the world that finite minds can *know* by way of clear and distinct ideas. We have also provided some rough definitions of what makes ideas clear and distinct and what makes them obscure or confused. Still, an important feature of the theological mysterian reading is the bridge from thought to world. In the next section I will argue that externality is built into a few of the key examples of clear and distinct ideas that Descartes uses. I will also draw a distinction between cases where finite being can intuit the truth of a fact *and* get to the truth-maker, and cases where there is no obvious truth-maker, yet the finite mind still recognizes the truth.

The Wax Passage, Externality, Representation and Truth

The *Second Meditation* wax passage is an excellent example of the Cartesian method of conceptual distinguishability. The wax passage is particularly rich in its content, but for our purposes we can focus on two important themes: that the passage provides us practice in discerning conceptual distinguishability, and the externality and representational nature of ideas. First, let us address what is distinguishable and what is inseparable from the idea of the wax. It is apparent from the meditator's discussion that the nature (essence) of the wax is discerned not from the senses, but by the pure intellect alone. She comes to this conclusion by recognizing that the features initially (and perhaps naively) taken to be essential to the wax are, in fact, all separable from the wax. That is, the smell, color, taste, specific shape, and sound are all features that can be changed without changing nature the object itself. Of course, by 'the object' I mean only the content of the experience, not the cause of that experience, as that is yet to be determined.

What is often the focus of this passage is that Descartes thinks that we come to know the essence of the contents of our ideas by way of pure intellect—but what is equally important is that the method here is to strip away those qualities that are unnecessary to understanding the nature object just as the meditator did with the simple notion of the self.

By the time our meditator comes to have a clear and distinct idea of the nature of the wax as an extended, flexible, changeable thing (discerned not through the imagination or senses, "but of purely mental scrutiny"[52]), what she has done is removed every feature from the idea that is inessential and found the most simple constituents of the content of the idea itself. That this process parallels the discussion of the self is no coincidence. Just as our meditator eliminated features often uncritically accepted as being ineliminable from the concept of the self (e.g. locomotion, nourishment, body, and so on), with the wax Descartes illustrates that (a) we can identify distinct ideas as those containing nothing inessential from the content of the idea itself in instances that *seem* to represent something external to the self in addition to ideas that are purely internal to the self, and (b) that regardless of the source of the content of our ideas, we are in a position to discern what is essential and what is inessential to the content of those ideas.

While this latter point is often celebrated in terms of the debate about the constitution of our mental content, what is more important and less discussed is that ideas for Descartes are essentially representational. The wax passage is, in many ways, about the externality of the representations we come to be aware of. In this way, the wax passage mirrors many discussions that come later in the *Meditations*. In the *Third Meditation,* the meditator discusses the sources of her ideas—some are innate, some are adventitious, and some are fabricated by herself—but what is worth noting is that regardless of the source of ideas, there are constraints that the ideas must follow. For example, the meditator notices two distinct ideas of the sun; one is derived from some external source and "makes the sun appear very small" while the other is "based on astronomical reasoning, that is, it is derived from certain notions which are innate in me…and this idea shows the sun to be several times larger than the earth."[53] Yet both of these ideas are essentially representations of some

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[52] *Second Meditation* (CSM II, p. 21).

[53] *Third Meditation* (CSM II, p. 27).

object. In the former case, we cannot decide to see the sun as if it were any way other than it seems to appear. There are constraints that limit the representation. But this is true also of the idea derived from astronomical reasoning. We must, so to speak, follow the path of reason where it leads. We cannot decide, with clarity and distinctness, that the sun is actually much smaller than the earth while holding the reasoning processes that led us to the astronomical idea of the sun before our minds. This is similar, of course, to the way in which Descartes's meditator cannot simply decide that the sweet scent of the wax is essential to it while paying close attention to the essence of the wax. But just as when we reason carefully about the sun without the limits imposed by the senses, Descartes's meditator suggests in the *Fifth Meditation* that there are constraints on even more abstract, yet still clearly and distinctly understood ideas.

> When, for example, I imagine a triangle, even if perhaps no such figure exists, or has ever existed anywhere outside of my thought, there is still a determinate nature, or essence, or form of the triangle which is immutable and eternal, and not invented by me or dependent on my mind. This is clear from the fact that various properties can be demonstrated of the triangle, for example that its three angles equal two right angles, that its greatest side subtends its greatest angle, and the like; and since these properties are ones which I now clearly recognize *whether I want to or not*, even if I never thought of them at all when I previously imagined the triangle, it follows that they cannot have been invented by me.[54]

One might wonder what it is, then, in which the truth of these ideas consists.

Above I mentioned that Descartes thinks that a properly simple idea is one that is merely self-evident regardless of whether or not it contains other ideas yet to be unpacked. Descartes seems to think that the notion of truth is such an idea. He says to Mersenne that truth, "seems a notion so transcendentally clear that nobody can be ignorant of it… Of course it is possible to explain the meaning of the word to someone who does not know the language, and tell him that the word 'truth,' in the strict sense, denotes the conformity of

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[54] *Fifth Meditation* (CSM II p. 45), emphasis added.

thought with its object…"[55] The self evidence of the nature of truth as the correspondence between the content of the idea with the object it represents, when taken in conjunction with the *Second Meditation* discussion of the wax serves to raise an interesting issue. One lesson often drawn from the wax discussion is that while the meditator is in no position to know whether or not the content of the imagination accurately represents the cause of that content, *if* the wax *were* to exist, the meditator *would* know (through reason alone) that its nature is merely an extended flexible body that is changeable in innumerable ways. But what is the truth-maker for this subjunctive conditional?

If the truth of an idea entails that there must be something to which the thought corresponds, and we take it to be certain that *if* the wax were to exist, then it *would* have such a nature, there must be something that conforms to this subjunctive. It might be tempting to suggest that the truth-maker is merely the *concept* of the wax itself, as would have to be Frankfurt's and Bennett's views. This, however, will not do. For the subjunctive does not really make sense if the concept of the wax is the truth-maker; after all, if the concept of the wax (*qua* modification of mind) is what makes true that the wax is essentially an extended object, then there is no need for the subjunctive in the first place. That is, if the content of the idea represents only itself and not something external, then the conditional "if it were to exist" is trivially fulfilled. The wax does exist in the meditator's idea, or to use Cartesian terms, it possesses 'objective reality.' As such it necessarily corresponds with itself and is thus a true representation; but this is decidedly uninteresting, or as one commentator has argued:

> Nor are true and immutable natures to be identified with objective reality. The true and immutable nature of X is the reality to which a true idea of X conforms. But a true idea does not *conform* to its objective reality. A true idea includes its objective reality and conforms to an object that has that reality formally or eminently.[56]

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[55] Descartes to Mersenne, 16 October, 1639 (CSMK, p. 139).

[56] (Cunning, Fifth Meditation TINs Revisited: A Reply to Criticism of the Epistemic Interpretation 2008), p. 218.

Since Descartes is committed to the notion that truth consists in an ideas conforming to the object of which it is a representation, it is important to flag here that the distinction between a finite mind's ability to grasp some truth and the ability to grasp the truth-maker. In some cases, it is clear that finite minds can easily access both, and in other cases it is not at all clear what might count as a truth-maker at all. Thus far I have pointed to a few cases where Descartes thinks that finite minds can have unproblematic intuitive knowledge of the truth of some proposition. The *cogito*, or the "first instance of knowledge" seems the paradigm case of the finite mind's ability to both grasp the truth of a proposition, viz. "I am, I exist," and to grasp the truth-maker. Above I discussed how it is that the *Second Meditation* is dedicated to unpacking what the self is. Yet there are other instances of clear and distinct knowledge for which the truth-maker is not so obvious. Descartes's causal maxims ("something cannot come from nothing," or "there is as much reality in the cause as in the effect"), truths of arithmetic, or our subjunctive conditional regarding that to which our idea of the wax conforms are all examples of cases where a finite mind grasps the truth of some fact without being able to identify to what the idea conforms. Of course, in the case of the wax, by the end of the *Meditations*, the meditator is able to grasp that the physical world serves as the truth-maker for her idea of the wax. Still, there is no obvious contender for the causal maxims or truths of arithmetic.

Commentators have wrestled with the truth-maker problem for some time. Anthony Kenny thinks that Descartes is "thoroughly Platonic"[57] in that the truth-makers for the *Fifth Meditation*'s true and immutable natures are some kind of third realm Platonic entity. Other commentators have pointed out that by suggesting that there exists a third realm of creatures, a doctrine central to Cartesian philosophy (substance dualism) is straightforwardly

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[57] (Kenny, The Cartesian Circle and the Eternal Truths 1970), p. 692. Cf. (Kenny, Descartes: a Study of His Philosophy 1968) p. 150-156.

violated.[58] In an attempt to avoid violating Cartesian dualism, Tad Schmaltz has argued that eternal truths are not distinct from divine decrees; that they are identified "with God himself."[59] Commentators have pointed out that such an identification, however, does damage to the idea that for Descartes, God is not an efficient cause of itself, while God is an efficient cause of both the eternal truths and the true and immutable natures.[60][61] To avoid all of these difficulties, Lawrence Nolan has suggested that the truth-makers for the eternal truths are just the objective reality of the ideas.[62] In this way, Nolan can preserve the created nature of the eternal truths, and avoid positing some extra-mental third realm. I argued above that for these ideas to be true there must be *something* to which they conform, and it cannot merely be concepts within the mind of a finite being. In focusing on the discussion of the wax, I suggested that identifying the truth-maker of the subjunctive conditional "if the wax were to exist, it would be essentially extended" with the objective reality of the idea trivializes what is gained by further investigation. Along this line of thought, David Cunning suggests that even though,

> prior to the end of the Fifth Meditation we do not have perfect certainty that anything exists outside of our thought, this does not mean that prior to the end of the Fifth Meditation Descartes

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[58] See: (Schmaltz 1991), (Nolan 1997), and (Cunning, True and Immutable Natures and Epistemic Progress in Descartes's Meditations 2003)

[59] (Schmaltz 1991), p. 135.

[60] In the *Fourth Replies* Descartes explains to Arnauld, "These words make it clear that I did believe in the existence of something that does not need an efficient cause. And what could that be, but God? […] Here the phrase 'his own cause' cannot possibly be taken to mean an efficient cause…" (CSM II, p. 165). In Descartes to Mersenne, 27 May, 1630, he says, "You ask me by what kind of causality God established the eternal truths. I reply: by the same kind of causality as he created all things, that is to say as their efficient and total cause" (CSMK, p. 25).

[61] See: (Nolan 1997) and (Cunning, True and Immutable Natures and Epistemic Progress in Descartes's Meditations 2003).

[62] (Nolan 1997), p.179.

> refrains from drawing conclusions about the existence of anything outside of our thought.[63]

That is, just because the meditator is *uncertain* about what exists outside of her thought, it does not follow that she is not, in some way or another drawing conclusions about such items. In order for progress to be made, the meditator has to be capable of working on the bridge from mind to world, and as we have seen, this is impossible on the conceptualist view.

The debate between commentators over the ontological status of the eternal truths illustrates just how fraught the interpretation can be. In Chapter Two I argued that they cannot be ideas in God's mind (as Malebranche thought) because that would violate the doctrine of divine simplicity, and Descartes seems to maintain that they are creations, just like any other. There are systematic reasons to reject Kenny's third-realm Platonism, and the conceptualist approach suffers serious problems as we have seen. I propose that this is yet another place where theological mysterianism can help. Rather than try to force a theory of truth-makers for the eternal truths onto Descartes, we should recognize that some facts obtain, and that Descartes need not have a full account of truth-makers in place. Below I will argue that this helps make sense of Descartes's views about God's nature and actuality. In Chapters Four and Five, I will argue that this distinction helps to resolve problems regarding modality through the examples of mind-body interaction and separability and in Cartesian free-will. For now, let us return to the way in which Descartes's notion of truth helps bridge the gap from mind to world.

It is no secret that Descartes's final answer regarding the truth-maker for idea concerning the essence of the wax is that the actual essence of physical bodies is nothing other than extension. Much of the *Sixth Meditation* is devoted to providing an argument for the claim that some of the ideas we possess of physical bodies do in some (but not all) ways

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[63] (Cunning, True and Immutable Natures and Epistemic Progress in Descartes's Meditations 2003), p. 238.

represent really existing things. As I noted above, however, at the time that the meditator is considering the wax, such a conclusion is not yet open to her. That Descartes would build in some discussion of the externality of mental representation in order to lay the groundwork for his later arguments is unsurprising. Throughout the early parts of the *Meditations*, the meditator touches on confused notions that will later become more refined insights into the Cartesian system. In fact, that very point is raised again at the outset of the *Third Meditation* immediately following the claim that whatever the meditator perceives very clearly and distinctly is true. "But there was something else which I used to assert, and which through habitual belief I thought I perceived clearly, although I did not in fact do so. This was that there were things outside me which were the sources of my ideas and which resembled them in all respects."[64] And to be sure, the latter portion of this claim, that the cause of the meditator's perceptions resembles the experiences *in all respects,* turns out to be false on the final Cartesian picture. But that there exist some objects out in the world that in some important ways do resemble the ideas we possess is certainly correct.

What is most important for our purposes here is that at the time of noticing the essence of the wax, the meditator is not in a position to access the truth-maker of her clear and distinct idea. Regardless, she is still in the position to know *that* the idea is true as far as it goes. That one can know *that* a fact is true without knowing the truth-maker is a lesson that appears again in both the *Third* and *Fifth Meditations* as well. I noted in Chapter One that the argument for God's existence from the cause of the meditator's idea in the *Third Meditation* involves a comparative notion between the idea of the self as finite and the idea of God as infinite. Much of the discussion in the *Third Meditation* concerns the ways in which the idea of God can be neither materially false nor merely a negation of finitude. But what is worth

64 *Third Meditation* (CSM II, p. 25).

noting is that the meditator, and by extension Descartes, does not think that finite minds can grasp the truth-maker for our idea of God. He writes,

> The idea of a supremely perfect and infinite being is, I say, true in the highest degree; for although perhaps one may imagine that such a being does not exist, it cannot be supposed that the idea of such a being represents something unreal, as I said with regard to the idea of cold. The idea is, moreover, utterly clear and distinct; for whatever I clearly and distinctly perceive as being real and true, and implying any perfection, is wholly contained in it. It does not matter that I do not grasp the infinite, or that there are countless additional attributes of God which I cannot in any way grasp, and perhaps cannot even reach in my thought; for it is in the nature of the infinite not to be grasped by a finite being like myself. It is enough that I understand the infinite, and that I judge that all the attributes which I clearly perceive and know to imply some perfection – and perhaps countless others of which I am ignorant – are present in God either formally or eminently. This is enough to make the idea I have of God the truest and most clear and distinct of all my ideas.[65]

Despite the limitations of finite cognition, the meditator is still able to see that the idea is true even when the content of the idea is so rich that it essentially escapes the grasp of a finite mind. The distinction between *understanding that* God is infinite and being able to *fully grasp* the infinitude of God is a view in Cartesian epistemology that dates back at least to 1630. In a letter to Mersenne, Descartes explains the difference between these two modes of intellection with regard to the immensity of God's nature, "In the same way we can touch a mountain with our hands but we cannot put our arms around it as we could put them around a tree or something else not too large for them. To grasp something is to embrace it in one's thought; to know something it is sufficient to touch it with one's thought."[66] I will return to the distinction between grasping and understanding momentarily. For now it is worth noticing that, just as with the wax, and with the geometric figures, there are constraints imposed on the ideas of finite minds by something external. In the case of the wax, once we have stripped the inessential features away, we have no choice but to see that if

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[65] *Third Meditation* (CSM II, pp. 31-32).

[66] Descartes to Mersenne, 27 May, 1630 (CSMK, p. 25).

any such figure exists it will be essentially a flexible, changeable body that is extended. In the case of geometric figures, we see that there are properties of them that, once discerned cannot be ignored regardless of whether or not anything like them really exists. Finally in the case of God, we recognize that there are features of our idea of God that are inseparable from it, such as eternality, immutability, independence, intelligence, power, and so on. Yet, despite the fact that the content of our ideas is restricted by some external force, and despite the fact that our ideas are essentially representational, as we saw in Chapter Two, the bridge from the mind to the world is not an easy one to build.

As we have seen, there is a fair amount of technical machinery built into the Cartesian theory of ideas that helps lay the groundwork for the bridge from the mind to the world. According to Descartes, the clarity and distinctness of our ideas serves to indicate the features that belong to their essences. There are certain features of the content of ideas whether they are derived from the senses or are innate that are present in the ideas regardless of whether we attend to them. That ideas themselves are representational, and that the content of the ideas is constrained in these ways—ways that preclude us from seeing whatever we want within the content of the idea—is some reason to suspect that the cause of them is external. That Descartes thinks that the correspondence theory of truth is a simple, self-evident notion, also pushes us in the direction of there being some kind of bridge already built here, as I argued above. But it is unclear, however, if we take the hyperbolic doubt of the *First Meditation* seriously that finite beings can ever know that their ideas correspond to what causes the ideas. I noted at the outset of this chapter that Frankfurt and Bennett offer accounts of modality that fail to get us out of our heads. I also noted that this is one of the most common objections to Descartes's work in the *Meditations*. What I want to offer now is an account of what Descartes may well have thought the bridge actually is. The short answer is that just as Descartes seems to think that finite minds can get a clear and distinct idea of a mountain by touching it, even if they cannot grasp the whole thing, I will argue that Descartes thought that finite minds can know the truth about God's

nature through clear and distinct ideas, even if they cannot grasp the truth-maker. I will suggest that finite minds can directly access God, in a way, by way of philosophical intuition and that such intuition is the bridge from the mind to the world. I will further argue that the Cartesian philosophical intuition is much closer to divine revelation than has previously been explored.

Divine Revelation and the Bridge from Mind to World

Even with the machinery of the Cartesian theory of mind, moving from the content of the ideas that populate finite minds to there being objects independent of those ideas that in the relevant sense correspond to them is no easy step. Above I have provided reasons to think that the representational nature of ideas, when coupled with the subjunctive conditional "if x were to exist, its essence would consist of y" we are left in an odd position regarding the truth-maker for such claims. If Frankfurt and Bennett's views are correct, then what makes these claims true is nothing more than the concepts present in finite minds. Such an account is problematic textually, as I argued above, as well as philosophically because finite beings would have never had access to anything outside of their own minds. Yet, given Descartes's commitment to the correspondence theory of truth, all true ideas must have an object to which they conform. I argued that even if finite minds are not aware of what that is, it remains that they know that it is *something*.

There is one example of an idea that finite minds possess that unproblematically guarantees the existence of its object: the idea of the self. The idea of the self is the first discovered instance in the Cartesian view that has ontological import. I suggested above that this idea is not (and cannot) be one that is derived from some manner of philosophical demonstration. Instead it must be some kind of philosophical intuition—a direct apprehension of the fact that something is true, and thus that a conformable object exists. What follows, then, is the Cartesian project of clarifying and distinguishing what it is that properly belongs to that object. That there can be an idea with ontological import, known

not by syllogistic argument but by intuition is important to the Cartesian project. We have other ideas that guarantee that certain features *would* exist if the object *were to* exist (as we discussed above concerning the wax and truths of mathematics), but there is only one other idea that finite minds possess that purportedly *guarantees* the mind-independent existence of the object: God. In the *Principles*, the order of the proofs for God's existence is reversed from the order presented in the *Meditations*. Descartes first offers the ontological argument—that we have an idea of God that entails the existence of God. Only a few sections later does he inquire about the cause of this idea. Yet, immediately after the proofs, Descartes reiterates his meditator's insistence that God is beyond the grasp of finite beings. In *Principles* I.19, he says, "Although we do not fully grasp [God's] perfections, since it is in the nature of an infinite being not to be fully grasped by us, who are finite, nonetheless we are able to understand them more clearly and distinctly than any corporeal things. This is because they permeate our thought to a greater extent, being simpler and unobscured by any limitations."[67] But we might wonder how exactly it is that an essentially finite being, a being whose mind is by definition limited, can possess an idea not only of infinity, but of an infinity of infinities so clearly and simply—for God is essentially an unlimited being in every sense and evidently it is part of God's nature that God is not to be grasped. For such an idea to permeate the finite mind there must be something more than a mere recognition that one has a complicated innate idea.

An important part of Chapter One was a survey of all of the ways in which the concept of God, though one finite minds innately possess on the Cartesian view, is not one that is fully conceivable for finite minds.[68] While my focus there was to discuss the ways in which finite cognition limits what can be known about absolute modality, the same theme

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[67] (CSM I, p. 199).

[68] See specifically, Chapter One: 'The Limitations of Finite Minds.'

applies cleanly to our knowledge of God. I also suggested in Chapter One that given Descartes's commitment to an extreme version of the doctrine of divine simplicity (DDS), that the Cartesian God is largely disanalogous to finite substances. That is, since God's will is strictly identical to all of God's other infinite attributes, and all finite beings are limited and divisible, there are a number of challenges that finite beings face in trying to make sense of and talk about God. Yet, at no point does Descartes shy away from doing so. All of this is merely review, but to sharpen the point, I'll say this. Descartes's stress upon the "feebleness of our nature"[69] provides us as interpreters with a legitimate challenge: how can a finite, feeble, essentially limited, contingent cognition contain an idea that expresses infinite, eternal essence with infinite objective reality? Descartes provides us a hint:

> *We must believe everything which God has revealed, even though it may be beyond our grasp.*
> Hence, if God happens to reveal to us something about himself or others which is beyond the natural reach of our mind – such as the mystery of the Incarnation or the Trinity – we will not refuse to believe it, despite the fact that we do not clearly understand it. And we will not be at all surprised that there is much, both in the immeasurable nature of God and in the things created by him, which is beyond our mental capacity.[70]

In the instance of the contemplation of God, we have a unique idea that guarantees the existence of its object. I want to engage in a bit of speculation. It is quite natural to think that on the Cartesian account clear and distinct perception and divine revelation are fundamentally different kinds of cognition. Here I would like to suggest that the difference between these two modes cognition is not as great as has commonly been assumed. To wit, in the case of coming to know about God's attributes, the avenue by which finite minds achieve this knowledge need not be an instance only of philosophical intuition, as was the

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69 *Principles* I.22 (CSM I, p. 200).

70 *Principles* I.25 (CSM I, p. 201).

cogito or the recognition that "something cannot come from nothing", but also one of divine revelation.

Recall that clear and distinct perceptions have the following characteristics: (i) the will is fully compelled to affirm the truth of the idea or that something conforms to the idea, (ii) the content of the idea is presented in an absolutely clear perception, and (iii) even though the finite mind might recognize that *something* conforms to the idea, the truth-maker is not captured. In this section I will illustrate that divine revelation shares two of these three features. What philosophical intuition and divine revelation share is the phenomenal compulsion of the will to affirm the truth of the idea (i) and the lack of access to the truth-maker (iii). Where the two forms of cognition differ is in the clarity of the *content* of the idea, as we will see. For a clear and distinct perception, the content of the perception is presented clearly and is grasped—the grasp of the content is what propels the will to affirm its truth. Regardless of the clarity of the *content*, we have just seen that the truth-maker for many of these ideas remains obscure. Yet, in the case of divine revelation we will see that the content of the idea itself *as well as* the truth-maker is obscure. Descartes's favorite examples of truths recognized by divine revelation include the Eucharist and the holy trinity. What is notable is that in both cases, in clear and distinct perception and in divine revelation, the finite mind has no immediate access to the truth-maker for the idea, the truth of which is beyond doubt. One might worry that if I am correct that clear and distinct perceptions are closer to divine revelation in the way that I suggest, that this serves to water-down Cartesian epistemology in a dangerous way—that is, if finite minds fail to gain access to the truth-makers in both cases, then all they get are a list of true propositions, and that is just not nearly as useful a tool as we might want. I recognize that this is an implication of my view, and ultimately, I do not think it is really a problem, but I will address this explicitly in Chapter Five. For now, let us merely notice the similarities between these two modes of cognition and see where it takes us.

By adding divine revelation to the traditional account of Descartes's epistemology, I argue that we will see that some philosophical work can be done on Descartes's behalf regarding some putative puzzles in the Cartesian system. An increasingly popular interpretive strategy is to notice that Descartes's *Meditations* are not strictly autobiographical; that he was writing in a way to try and capture the attention of diverse groups of people who have unique preconceived opinions. Cunning argues that, "Descartes is aware that what helps one student to understand a view will not necessarily help another. He is aware that he is a teacher of a variety of minds."[71] No doubt, some of the minds Descartes sought to capture were themselves open to neo-Platonism. I would like to turn briefly to some historical evidence that present in the intellectual climate at the time Descartes was writing was a resurgence of neo-Platonic mysticism. In Chapter Two I noted that there is some reason to think that Descartes might have been open to mysticism because of the influence of Cardinal Bérulle (following a passing note made by Frankfurt). This is a plausible hypothesis.

> Spanish mysticism became the basis for the view and practices of the French Oratorians, the group that encouraged Descartes on his search for truth from his meeting with Cardinal Bérulle in 1628 and then all through his career. Bérulle gave Descartes his mission to find a new basis for certainty, and Descartes kept seeking approval of the Oratorians for each of his publications. His theory can be viewed as a rational, scientific way of explaining their cosmos, a divinely dominated world, in which God constantly creates, conserves, and orders the world according to His All Powerful Will.[72]

There is also anecdotal evidence that suggests that Descartes was already open to mysticism. In 1619, when Descartes is first said to have discovered his philosophical method, Descartes had a series of dreams all of which he described as divine revelation.[73] Furthermore, in his

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[71] (Cunning, Argument and Persuasion in Descartes's Meditations 2010) p. 29.

[72] (Popkin 1998). See also, (Gouhier 1954). For a detailed account of the meetings in which Bérulle encouraged Descartes, see (Gaukroger 1995) specifically p. 183-86.

[73] For a full account of the dreams, and an interpretation of Descartes's reception to them, see (Gaukroger 1995), specifically p. 106-111.

Fourth Replies, Descartes, in explaining the distinction between complete and adequate knowledge, says that finite beings can come to possess knowledge of a *fact* by way of God's granting access to it through revelation. "A created intellect, by contrast, though perhaps it may in fact possess adequate knowledge of many things, can never know it has such knowledge unless God grants it special revelation of the fact."[74]

Apart from the systematic reasons precluding syllogistic reasoning, Descartes says in the *Second Replies* that there are two different ways in which finite beings can come to have knowledge or certainty.

> We must distinguish between the subject-matter, or the thing itself which we assent to, and the formal reason which induces the will to give its assent: it is only in respect of the reason that transparent clarity is required. As for the subject matter, no one has ever denied that it may be obscure – indeed obscurity itself. When I judge that obscurity must be removed from our conceptions to enable us to assent to them without danger of going wrong, this very obscurity is the subject concerning which I form a clear judgment. *It should also be noted that the clarity or transparency which can induce our will to give its assent is of two kinds: the first comes from the natural light, while the second comes from divine grace.* Now although it is commonly said that faith concerns matters which are obscure, this refers solely to the thing or subject-matter to which our faith relates; it does not imply that the formal reason which leads us to assent to matters of faith is obscure. On the contrary, this formal reason consists in a certain inner light which comes from God, and when we are supernaturally illuminated by it we are confident that what is put forward for us to believe has been revealed by God himself. And it is quite impossible for him to lie; this is more certain than any natural light, and is often more evident because of the light of grace.[75]

There is quite a bit to unpack from this short passage. What is most important for my purposes here is that Descartes is stressing a distinction both between the (i) content of a mental perception, and the reason that the finite will assents to the truth of the mental

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[74] *Fourth Replies* (CSM II, p. 155). See also: *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, Rule Three (CSM I, p. 15); *Preface to the French Edition* of *Principles of Philosophy* (CSM I, p. 181); *Principles* I.25 (CSM I, p. 201); *Principles* I.76 (CSM I, p. 221); Descartes to Hogelande, August 1638 (CSMK, p. 120); *Conversation with Burman* (CSMK, p. 350-1).

[75] *Second Replies* (CSM II, p. 105), emphasis added.

perception, and (ii) the two different ways in which a finite being's will comes to be compelled: one by the famous "light of nature," and another by what he calls the "light of grace." In both cases, as I suggested above, the will *is* compelled to affirm the truth of the idea.

The content of our mental perceptions may be either distinct or obscure, as we discussed above with the notion of pain. Yet here Descartes seems to imply that in some instances of clearly understood *reasons*, we may still understand some content that seems to us obscure—but only if it is presented by the appropriately *clear* reason. What is important to note, however, is that in matters where the content of a mental apprehension is totally obscure, only a certain subset of ideas can be trusted as true: those presented by the light of grace. In this case, both the truth-maker and the content of the idea are obscure—but the mind is still compelled to assent to their truth in virtue of the *clear reasons*. Below I will argue that these obscure facts are limited to a few kinds: God's nature, and theological mysteries. Recognizing that in cases of clear and distinct perception, what is gained is not significantly more epistemically powerful than in cases of divine revelation will help us to make sense of some of the odd things Descartes says regarding mind-body interaction (which I will turn to in Chapter Four), and the reconciliation of finite freedom with divine preordination (to which I turn in Chapter Five).

The light of nature is that on which most scholars have focused in trying to make sense of Descartes's project. I suspect that this is the case because Descartes himself was shy when it came to matters of theology as opposed to philosophy. Yet, to try to divorce entirely the Cartesian philosophical programme from scientific and religious influence is to miss the dense interconnection between the various projects.

> One of [Descartes's physics's] founding stones was the principle of interia. The mechanical philosophy insisted that all the phenomena of nature are produced by particles in motion… What causes motion? Since matter is by definition inert stuff consciously pruned of active principles, it is obvious that matter cannot be the cause of its own motion. In the 17th century, everyone agreed that the

> origin of motion lay with God. In the beginning, He created matter and set it in motion.[76]

But if Cartesian physics, like all physics of the time, starts with God then there must be some recourse for Descartes to make sense of God. As I argued above, on the Cartesian picture, making sense of God is a difficult task; indeed it seems to be one that is *prima facie* impossible given the limits of finite cognition. The trouble I outlined above can be eased by appealing to the important differences between the "light of nature" and "light of grace," and the above distinction between truth and truth-maker.

There is no shortage of passages where Descartes (or Descartes's meditator) expresses the unintelligibility of God's nature. Finite minds are capable of understanding *that* God is eternal, immutable, omnipotent, and so on, but they cannot *grasp* the entirety of what that means. It is here that the passage from the *Second Replies* becomes instructive, however. Descartes's distinction between the reason and the content is important. The content of our judgments concerning God's nature and existence are bound to be confused in some sense simply in virtue of the immensity of God's nature and the finitude of created minds. Finite beings simply cannot grasp the way in which all of God's attributes are identical to one another, though they are *individually* clearly and distinctly understood. If the reasons for which we come to make the judgment that they are unified are transparent—as is the case when illuminated by the light of grace, then there is no way in which we can go wrong. This squares nicely with the discussion in *Principles* I.25 (quoted above) where Descartes reminds us that God reveals truths the content of which we cannot fully understand. It is no coincidence, I suggest, that apart from various theological mysteries (the Trinity, or the Eucharist, e.g.) Descartes includes as content that we cannot fully understand "the immeasureable nature of God." But if we take seriously the discussion in the *Second Replies*, then there is a nice distinction between the inconceivable nature of God and the way in

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[76] (Westfall 1977), p. 34.

which finite minds come to know it. Finite minds come to understand obscure, yet true, ideas through a clear use of reason; not unlike the method by which they come to grasp distinct truths.[77] It is no coincidence that the language Descartes uses in that passage concern the *clarity* of the avenue, so to speak, by which we come to perceive the content which is itself beyond our grasp. Descartes is trying to show that the light of nature and the light of grace (read: divine revelation) are not very different modes of intellection, but really differ only in terms of the grasp finite minds can attain of the content. In instances of knowledge by the light of nature, such as the *cogito*, the wax, or *that* God is good, finite minds can grasp the content distinctly, while in instances of divine revelation, such as God's infinite unity, the content is essentially beyond the grasp of the finite mind, yet still cannot be doubted.

The Truth of Finite Perceptions: Lights of Nature and Grace

What I have been trying to build to is the conclusion that instances of clear and distinct perceptions of some fact presented by the light of nature are not all that different from instances of divine revelation. Where these kinds of perceptions differ is in the degree to which finite minds can grasp the content. In the case of divine revelation, finite minds recognize the truth of some fact that is an implication of God's being. But since God's nature is essentially beyond the grasp of finite beings, the implications of the sovereignty of such a being are ineffable. Thus, in cases where God reveals through the light of grace some obscure fact about the Trinity, for example, what the finite intellect perceives is some truth, the content *and* the truth-maker of which is beyond the grasp of the finite mind. This is the reason that the content is sometimes obscure—for if God's nature is itself beyond the grasp

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[77] Again, what distinguishes an instance of revelation from a clear and distinct perception is that second characteristic: the clarity of the *content* of the idea. In the case of clear and distinct perception the content of the idea is clear and distinct but the truth-maker is at least initially obscure, while in cases of divine revelation, both the content and the truth-maker are obscure.

of finite minds, then what follows from the execution of that nature is equally going to escape them.

"But," one might object, "Descartes does say that finite beings clearly and distinctly perceive things about God's nature, does what you have just said imply that finite beings *cannot* have clear and distinct ideas of God?" It is absolutely correct that Descartes says that we have a clear and distinct idea of God's existence, or of God's non-deceiving nature, or of God's infinite power. On the view that I am offering, these are truths that finite beings understand. What is worth noting about these truths, however, is that they concern God's possessing a single attribute. The finite mind is here in a position analogous to that when apprehending the truth of causal axioms, or of simple arithmetic truths; that is, she recognizes, and is normatively justified in believing the truth of the idea (and by the nature of truth, that something to which the idea corresponds must exist) yet is not in a position to recognize what makes it true. That is, the finite mind is able to distinctly grasp the nature of these individual attributes distinctly. The finite mind can grasp and understand the nature of goodness, for instance, clearly and distinctly, even though the thing to which that idea conforms is beyond her grasp. God's nature is so vast that as a totality it escapes the grasp of finite cognition, but certain facts about God need not. Consider this passage from the *First Replies*,

> When we look at the sea, our vision does not encompass its entirety, nor do we measure out its enormous vastness; but we are still said to 'see' it. In fact if we look from a distance so that our vision almost covers the entire sea at one time, we see it only in a confused manner, just as we have a confused picture of a chiliagon when we take in all its sides at once. But if we fix our gaze on some part of the sea at close quarters, then our view can be clear and distinct, just as our picture of a chiliagon can be, if it is confined to one or two of the sides. In the same way, God cannot be taken in by the human mind, and I admit this, along with all theologians. Moreover, God cannot be distinctly known by those who look from a distance as it were, and try to make their minds encompass his entirety all at once.[78]

[78] (CSM II, p. 81).

In this way finite minds apprehend the truth of God's goodness, even if they cannot grasp fully what makes that true. Just as it is obvious to the atheist geometer that the internal angles of a triangle sum to 180 degrees, *and she knows that to be true*, while attending to the idea finite minds possess of God's goodness, it is impossible to doubt that God is not a deceiver.

As I argued above, the light of nature serves as another guarantee of the veracity of some ideas held by finite minds. In those cases of belief illuminated by the light of nature, finite minds cannot help but assent to the propositions expressed. Some paradigmatic examples include that 'something cannot come from nothing,' elementary arithmetical propositions, 'that the greatest line of a triangle always subtends the greatest angle,' and so forth. If the light of nature, however, is analogous to the light of grace in the manner by which it guarantees a clear path to the truth of a proposition, then it seems that in those instances where finite minds perceive clearly and distinctly the truth of claims such as these there must be an analogous justificatory story to be told. I argued above that these are cases where merely attending to the clear and distinct perceptions provides normative certainty. I also argued that these are instances where finite minds understand the truth without having recourse to the truth-maker. As I have argued in Chapter Two and above, the truth-makers cannot simply be the concepts themselves. Instead, what I suggest here is that the light of nature provides clear access to the truth, and only sometimes to the truth-maker (and even in those cases, the truth maker must be found as a result of further cognitive work). Given Descartes's view that truth is the correspondence between thought and object, it follows that there must be something in the world to which these truths correspond—even when what that is, is beyond the grasp of finite beings. In this way, the light of nature provides Descartes with a bridge from the mind to the world. When finite minds have a clear and distinct perception, what they perceive is that their idea is true. As we saw with the *cogito*, only with further effort, and only in some cases can finite beings come to have a definitive account of the truth-maker for these truths.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that the Cartesian notion of clear and distinct ideas is significantly limited in its scope in the sense that when having clear and distinct perceptions, finite minds only recognize *that* some proposition is true. *How* it is true, or what makes it true is not contained within such a perception, and is often not forthcoming within the Cartesian picture. Yet, the truth of certain perceptions, when combined with the nature of truth on the Cartesian picture provides the bridge from the Cartesian mind to the world. I have also argued that it is in virtue of this mechanism that Descartes thought that finite minds could gain direct access to the truth of clear and distinct perceptions, the truth-makers of which are ineffable for (or beyond the grasp of) finite cognition. In the next two chapters I will argue that in cases of modal knowledge, the truth-maker for a large number of clearly understood possibility claims is an implication of the fact that God possess inconceivably great power, and is thus beyond the grasp of finite cognition. In the cases on which I will focus, some truths presented by the light of nature seem inconsistent, and thus recourse to the light of grace, when joined with the distinction between truth and truth-maker (the latter being ineffable) will help resolve the tensions. Despite the ineffability of the truth-maker, I will argue that the truth of these modal claims is knowable in the same way that simple arithmetical truths and causal axioms are known.

CHAPTER FOUR: A DISTINCT POSSIBILITY, DESCARTES'S MIND-BODY UNION AND SEPARABILITY

Introduction

In Chapter Three I argued that instances of clear and distinct perception guarantee not only the truth of that which is the content of such perceptions, but also that such instances, in virtue of being true entail that there is some object in existence that conforms to the idea. What the truth-maker is, however, is not immediately obvious in most cases. In some cases further analysis can help the finite mind to come to know what makes true *some* clearly perceived truths. For instance, in the case of the *Second Meditation* meditator's intuitive realization that she exists so long as she thinks, further analysis needed to be performed in order to unpack what exactly the intellect and will are beyond mere features of the self or modes of thought. Conversely, there are some instances of clear and distinct perceptions the truth-makers of which lie beyond what finite minds are capable of grasping. The most obvious example of clearly and distinctly intuited truths, the truth-maker of which is ineffable, are claims regarding God's nature. Finite minds are capable of recognizing *that* certain propositions concerning God's nature are true even though there are further considerations that preclude finite minds from fully grasping that which makes them true. The innate idea of the Cartesian God is so rich that, while finite beings are capable of noticing certain features by holding the idea clearly and distinctly before their minds (sovereignty, goodness, etc.), the total content (including the identity conditions that obtain between all of God's attributes)[1] is beyond the grasp of finite cognitions. Still, that clear and distinct perceptions guarantee *that* there is a truth-maker that conforms to the content of the perceptions serves to guarantee that God exists, is supremely powerful, is perfectly good, is a perfect unity, and so forth. Finite minds know *that* these propositions are true; *how* they are true is beyond them.

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[1] See *Principles* I.23 (CSM I, p. 201).

That clear and distinct perceptions guarantee the truth of their contents is not a novel position. What is novel is that these special instances of cognition fail to do very much work on the Cartesian picture. I argued that clear and distinct perceptions only show finite beings *that* something is true, not what makes it true. In the previous chapter I focused on instances of clearly and distinctly understood truth regarding the actual world—the existence and nature of the self, causal axioms, the existence and nature of God, arithmetic, and geometry. Of these five categories of truths, the latter four include necessary truths. I suggested in Chapter Two that while there is an important connection between the conceptual relations that hold between clearly and distinctly understood ideas that populate finite minds and the way the world is, bridging the gap between mind and world is problematic for many interpretations. In Chapter Three, I argued for a way to try to bridge that gap. In this chapter I will briefly explain how it is that the theological mysterian can consistently maintain that such truths, and indeed a few others track the way their objects really are, even in the face of God's inconceivable power. In keeping with Descartes's preferred method for distinguishing clear and distinct ideas from obscure and confused ideas (as laid out in the *Second Replies*),[2] I will discuss the Cartesian view regarding the *separability* of mind and body as a paradigm example of the knowledge of a possible state of affairs, rather than an actual or necessary state of affairs. I will contrast the separability of mind and body with the *union* of the two, and illustrate the way in which Descartes's peculiar response to Elisabeth of Bohemia's objections to the mind-body interaction becomes illuminated when read through the theological mysterian lens.

From the Actual to the Actually Necessary

In the previous chapter I laid out the portions of the Cartesian theory of mind that seem to represent externality as if it were a part of the content of the ideas themselves. I also

[2] (CSM II, p. 116).

explained how it is that on most traditional accounts, Descartes has a very difficult time moving from the ideas and concepts that seem to represent external items to there actually being objects outside of the finite intellect that are properly represented by those ideas. This problem is one that is exacerbated by certain accounts of Cartesian modality. I also suggested that there are instances where Descartes thinks that finite minds can have unmediated access to facts that are true through some of their clear or clear and distinct ideas without having to have a grasp on their truth-makers. Through divine revelation or clear and distinct apprehension, finite minds recognize truths the truth-makers for which are ineffable or simply not forthcoming at the moment. That is, while finite beings are unable to properly conceptualize what it is that makes true certain ideas, they are able to apprehend the fact that certain propositions are true. I argued that in the cases of arithmetical or geometric truths, and in the cases of abstract truths such as 'something cannot come from nothing' the way in which finite minds come to recognize their truth is limited. Yet the limitation is not that finite beings misunderstand or fail to grasp the modal status of these propositions. What the limitation amounts to is, as I have argued all along, that since God's power extends beyond anything that a finite mind can understand, what follows from that power is not within the purview of human speculation. To that end Descartes reminds us, "we will not be at all surprised that there is much, both in the immeasurable nature of God and in the things created by him, which is beyond our mental capacity."[3] That is, in virtue of the fact that finite beings *know* that certain truths are necessary, and that in virtue of being finite, they cannot even make sense of what might follow from God's nature, they ought not form judgments regarding what I have previously referred to as absolute possibility. To put it succinctly, God's power is inconceivable, thus whether the proposition '2+2=4' is "contingent" for God or the Angels is of no consequence—it is inconceivable.

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[3] *Principles* I.25 (CSM I, p. 201).

True Ideas of Necessity

The argument that I am offering here to establish the veracity of the necessity certain ideas are afforded is remarkably similar to that which I advanced in the previous chapter with the aim of establishing that there are facts finite minds can know by way of philosophical intuition. In order for necessary truths to be true at all, given the correspondence theory of truth, there must be something in reality to which the ideas conform. That is to say, what grounds the *necessity* of such truths is also going to wind up being some ineffable truth-maker. Whether that truth-maker is God, God's commands, some feature of the created world or something entirely different, Descartes need not say. Simply because he does not have an account of the truth-maker for modal statuses, he need not shy away from asserting them.

In order to make clear what separates the self-evident truth of necessary truths from the few instances of self-evident, but contingent truths, it is useful to return again to the examples of God and the self. There is no question that God is, on the Cartesian picture, a necessary being, while Descartes himself, the meditator, you and I are merely contingent beings. One of the greatest problems facing the Frankfurt and Bennett view, as I argued in Chapter Two, was that on their views one cannot ground the necessity of God's existence in anything other than psychological certainty. Recall that for Frankfurt, *absolute* necessity is simply off limits to the finite mind (if it even exists) and those facts they take to be true need not even be true at all. The best one can get on Frankfurt's view is that finite minds cannot think of God except as existing. The same is true of Bennett's view. Recall that Bennett thinks that necessity is reduced to the interrelations between concepts—so that God necessarily exists just *means* that finite beings cannot but think of God as existing. On my own view, while I preserve the claim that the modal status of a proposition is *noticed* in virtue of finite beings recognizing the myriad relations that stand between concepts, that does not *constitute* the modal statuses. As I argued in Chapter Three, truth for Descartes is the correspondence between thought and object. Thus, while the recognition that clear and

distinct perceptions get one to the truth of some matter, and that truth entails that there is something in existence that conforms to the idea, Descartes need not know or have an account of what that something is. The same story goes for necessary truths. Descartes notes that God's nature is infinite and perfect. A constituent part of perfection is existence, thus existence is inseparably bound to perfection (and on the Cartesian view, existence *is a* perfection). Since Descartes recognizes that these relations really do hold between the ideas, and he clearly and distinctly perceives the ideas, not only do the ideas conform to something in the world, but the relations between the ideas must as well. From this it follows that a perfect being itself *contains* existence. I am not endorsing the Cartesian 'proof' of God's existence, but rather trying to illustrate the way in which the truth-maker for necessity claims is something outside of the finite mind on the Cartesian view.

Concerning the proofs for God's existence, this matches nicely with some of the passages that I highlighted in Chapter One. For example, in the *Fifth Meditation* Descartes's meditator notes,

> But from the fact that I cannot think of God except as existing, it follows that existence is inseparable from God, and hence he really exists. It is not that my thought makes it so, or imposes any necessity on any thing; on the contrary, it is the necessity of the thing itself, namely the existence of God, which determines my thinking in this respect. For I am not free to think of God without existence (that is, a supremely perfect being without a supreme perfection) as I am free to imagine a horse with or without wings.[4]

As I have suggested above, what makes true the idea that God *necessarily* exists is not the objective reality of the idea itself, or the connection between the idea of God and the idea of existence, it is that there is something in reality to which that relation, which holds between the ideas of God and existence, conforms. In this case, the real object to which the conceptual relations correspond is God.

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[4] (CSM II, p. 46).

But what grounds the necessity in other instances of necessary truths? As I argued in Chapter Three, Descartes is not committed to any particular answer. In Chapter One I pointed to passages where Descartes describes some of the eternal truths as neither beings, nor modes of beings but rather as "moral beings," and places where he suggests that necessity is located in finite minds. There I also flagged the issue regarding truth-makers for these claims. Recalling this discussion is salient here, as we are now in a better position to make sense of the disparate passages and can provide a unified account, not of the truth-makers, but of why it is that Descartes refused to attribute to them a specific ontological status. The somewhat frustrating answer is that, given the proper account of the Cartesian God, finite minds are simply not in a position to know what the truth-maker is for most necessary truths. Once we recognize that there *is* something that serves as the object to which the abstract, yet clearly understood propositions conform, and that their status as necessary is linked to God's nature, either as a free decree, as an ineffable category of ontological being, or whatever it is, it is sufficient to recognize that they are true. What makes it the case that it is *necessary* that 'what is done cannot be undone' is not that its denial is inconceivable for a finite mind, but rather there is something in creation to which this conforms that depends on God, as all things do, even though finite beings know not what.

This discussion serves to explain why it is that Descartes spends a fair amount of time refusing to discuss what kind of being the eternal truths are, and why he stresses the conceptual relations. It is not because the conceptual relations serve as the truth-makers for necessity claims, but rather that when a finite mind clearly and distinctly recognizes inseparability or containment relations between concepts, this recognition serves to guarantee the truth of those connections whenever they are considered, *and* provides the thinker with a way to *notice* modal truths. This interpretation squares nicely with the way that Descartes often talks about the eternal truths, and allows me to accommodate even passages

that seem on their face to be problematic. Consider the passage from *Principles* I.48 where Descartes says of the eternal truths that they "have no existence outside of our thought."[5] On a cursory reading of this passage it might appear that the eternal truths ought to be identified with the conceptual relations. Yet, insofar as the eternal truths are *ideas* within a finite mind, they cannot have any existence outside of a mind—ideas are modes of thinking substance, and as such they cannot exist on their own. Yet, this does not preclude there being something, though we know not what, to which these ideas conform. Since the eternal truths depend entirely for their existence on God's creation, the truth-makers are implications of God's infinite power. Considering that God's power is well beyond the grasp of any finite cognition, what makes these eternal truths true is well beyond what can be grasped by finite beings. It follows that finite beings should be content to recognize that these claims are eternally and necessarily true, even if *how* they are necessary or eternal is forever unclear. To put the issue bluntly, the best finite beings are going to get in terms of understanding the necessity of causal axioms is the conceptual relations, conjoined with the nature of truth as correspondence. This entails that there is something that makes them necessarily true, but finite minds will never know what that something is through natural reason, so they should not try to judge what is beyond their grasp. Finite minds should recognize their own cognitive limitations and judge only what is clearly and distinctly understood, and while the truth and necessity of the eternal truths fall into that category, the truth-makers do not.

I want to turn now to explain the ways in which finite minds can know, unproblematically, that certain *possibility* claims are true. What I have tried to establish so far is the way in which finite minds can know truths that are *actually* the case. I have yet to establish that finite minds can know what *might* be the case. When I say that certain

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[5] (CSM I, p. 208).

possibility claims are true within the Cartesian system, I do not mean that certain *contingent* propositions are true (if any such propositions exist). After all, our meditator notices that her existence is contingent very early on—that her essence does not *contain* existence in the way that God's does. Instead what I want to suggest regarding true *possibility* claims is more contentious. In Chapter One I noted that proponents of the actualist and the necessitarian readings of Descartes's creation doctrine argue that there is simply no room in the Cartesian ontology for unactualized, but still created possibility.[6] After all, given the constraints of divine simplicity, and the austere, yet dualist Cartesian ontology, there would appear to be no open space for unactualized possibility. The argument is compelling on its face. What I want to argue here, and in the next chapter, is that there are a few cases of clearly and distinctly understood *unactualized possibilities* within the Cartesian system, and that the theological mysterian position can account for their truth. In the remainder of this chapter I will focus on Descartes's (in)famous argument for the *separability* of the mind and the body, for if it is true that mind and body are unified yet independent substances, then it must be the case that each substance *can* exist apart—even though they do not currently. However, prior to addressing Descartes's arguments for the separability of mind and body, I would like to argue briefly that there are instances within the Cartesian system where a finite mind can know that something is *actually possible*, even if the truth-maker is ineffable.

From the Necessary to the Possible

The examples of knowledge concerning possibility claims are not as obvious as those that concern necessity, but they are present in Descartes's writing. In keeping with the method that Descartes himself thought best for understanding what makes ideas clear and distinct, I will use two examples of modal knowledge that Descartes thinks finite minds possess: the separability of mind and body, and human freedom. The former is the topic of

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[6] (Nelson and Cunning 1999).

this chapter; the latter is the topic of Chapter Five. First I will briefly sketch both instances and argue that if a Cartesian has a *true* belief regarding possibility in these cases that there must be some feature of reality that makes the belief true.

There is some reason to think that Descartes maintains that finite beings possess contra-causal freedom of the will in at least some cases.[7] The connection between freedom of the will and modality might not be immediately obvious, but I maintain that any account of freedom of the will is going to require some discussion of the nature of possibility. For now it will suffice to show that freedom and modality are closely connected, and that on Descartes's view finite beings know that some possible states of affairs exist. Descartes is unequivocal about his commitment to the freedom of finite wills, and whether this freedom is best understood as a compatibilist or incompatibilist conception will depend on Descartes's modal commitments. The very concept of contra-causal freedom presupposes that there are possibilities open to an agent prior to acting, for if a finite being can legitimately choose whether to "do or not do something (that is, to affirm or deny, pursue or avoid),"[8] it must be *possible* for the agent to do *either* action. To wit, determining whether or not Descartes is a compatibilist or incompatibilist with regard to human freedom depends on whether or not he is committed to determinism (either causal or theological), and the extent to which he is committed to the *existence* of alternate possibilities. Of course, if alternate courses of action are impossible for the agent because of the nature Cartesian modality, then Descartes must have some kind of compatibilist conception of freedom

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[7] The extent and nature of the freedom of the Cartesian will is of considerable debate. Some interpreters (Cecilia Wee, for example) think that Descartes's view is that even in cases of clear and distinct perceptions, finite beings *can* withhold assent to a proposition. Others (C.P. Ragland, for example) maintain that only in cases of obscure or confused ideas can finite beings choose to withhold belief. Still other interpreters (Michael Della Rocca, and Vere Chappell, for example) maintain that there is compelling reason to interpret Descartes as a compatibilist. I will address this debate in Chapter Five, but for now I will merely argue that whatever Descartes's view on freedom of the will, it is importantly tied to modal knowledge.

[8] *Fourth Meditation* (CSM II, p. 40).

(though such an approach is not without its detractors in the modern period). I will return to the question of whether or not Descartes is committed to determinism (in any sense) in Chapter Five. For now I am concerned only to show that Descartes thinks that finite beings know something about possibility.

What does Descartes say about finite freedom and the existence of alternate possibility? There is little room for doubt that the role of freedom plays an important role in the Cartesian programme. The entire project of the *Meditations* is predicated on the ability to withhold belief in cases of insufficient evidence (or in this case, a lack of certainty). The *Fourth Meditation* is primarily an analysis of how it is that finite beings can err if a morally perfect, all-powerful being has created them, and the unsurprising upshot is that humans misuse their freedom. Furthermore, in *Principles* I.37, Descartes proclaims that,

> It is a supreme perfection in man that he acts voluntarily, that is, freely; this makes him in a special way the author of his own actions and deserving praise for what he does… When we embrace the truth, our doing so voluntarily is much more to our credit than would be the case if we could not have done otherwise.[9]

In this particular passage, Descartes seems to be equating the ability to do otherwise than one does with moral praiseworthiness/blameworthiness. Shortly later in the *Principles*, Descartes asserts that finite beings possess "such close awareness of freedom and indifference which is in [them] that there is nothing [they] can grasp more evidently or more perfectly."[10] These passages together make a compelling case for the existence of alternate possibilities. If this were the whole story, however, I would not need to devote a chapter to Cartesian freedom. Unfortunately, the story is much more complex than these two passages. The latter quote appears in the elaboration of *Principles* I.41, which is titled, "How to reconcile freedom of the will with divine preordination." Still, these two passages, and

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[9] (CSM I, p. 194). See also, *Fourth Meditation* (CSM II, p. 40, 42); *Third Replies* (CSM II, p. 135); *Sixth Replies* (CSM II, p. 292); Descartes to Mesland 9 February, 1645 (CSMK p. 245-6).

[10] *Principles,* I.41 (CSM I, p. 206).

myriad others like them provide evidence for the existence and (finite) knowledge of alternate possibilities. This is a complicated matter, however, for many passages seem to imply a compatibilist reading. In that case, the compatibilist is going to have to offer another story regarding the ways in which compatibilist free-will can serve as a theodicy, or offer an alternate story of what Descartes's project is in the *Fourth Meditation*. In Chapter Five I will argue for the claim that the considered Cartesian view regarding freedom does not fit neatly into the compatibilist/libertarian dichotomy, yet still incorporates modal knowledge. For now I merely need to make the case that it is *plausible* that Descartes thinks that finite beings can know something about possible reality. That there is at least an open question regarding knowledge of possibilities is obviously the case when we consider the scope and operation of the finite will.

Perhaps the most famous example is Descartes's claim that finite beings can know that even though the mind and body are closely connected in living humans, such a connection is not essential; the mind and body *could* be separated.

> First, I know that everything which I clearly and distinctly understand is capable of being created by God so as to correspond exactly with my understanding of it. Hence the fact that I can clearly and distinctly understand one thing apart from another is enough to make me certain that the two things *are distinct*, since they are capable of being separated at least by God. The question of what kind of power is required to bring about such a separation does not affect the judgment that the two things are distinct. Thus, simply by knowing that I exist and seeing *at the same time* that absolutely nothing else belongs to my nature or essence except that I am a thinking thing, I can infer *correctly* that my essence consists solely in the fact that I am a thinking thing. It is true that I may have (or, to anticipate, that I certainly have) a body that is very closely joined to me. But nevertheless, on the one hand I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, in so far as I am simply a thinking, non-extended thing; and on the other hand I have a distinct idea of body, in so far as this is simply an extended, non-thinking thing. And accordingly, it is certain that I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it.[11]

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11 *Sixth Meditation* (CSM II, p. 54), emphasis mine.

Here we can see an example of what seems to be a knowable modal fact. It is precisely because God is capable of making the mind and body separate, even though they are not now *actually* separate, that Descartes's meditator is confident in her conclusion. In order for Descartes's meditator to make this proclamation, however, it is worth noting that she must be *certain* that this is the case. Descartes's meditator even reminds us of this earlier in the *Meditation*,

> I can, as I say, easily understand that this is how imagination comes about, if the body exists; and since there is no other equally suitable way of explaining imagination that comes to mind, I can make a probable conjecture that the body exists. *But this is only a probability*; and despite a careful and comprehensive investigation, I do not yet see how the distinct idea of corporeal nature which I find in my imagination can provide any basis *for a necessary inference* that some body exists.[12]

This serves as a reminder that Descartes's project is to provide infallible foundations for knowledge. I point this out only because instances of modal knowledge will have to follow the same standards in order to be *knowledge*, and not mere probabilities. That is, the passage where Descartes's meditator asserts that she *knows* that the mind and body are separable must be held to the same standards as all other knowledge claims. A conceptualist account such as those considered in Chapter Two might be able to account for the truth of modal claims (though I have raised some concerns regarding the viability of such a view), but falls short of any claim about the world outside of our minds. That is, if the truth-maker for the separability of mind and body is merely the fact that the two concepts finite beings possess (mind and body, respectively) stand in a particular relation to one another, then there is no bridge from mind to reality, despite Descartes's meditator's seeming claim to certain knowledge that there is one.

As I discussed in Chapter Two, and above, the actualist and necessitarians have offered compelling arguments against the existence of truth-makers for propositions

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[12] *Sixth Meditation* (CSM II, p. 51), emphasis mine.

concerning possible states of affairs on the basis of Cartesian ontology. The argument runs like this. If unactualized possibility exists, then it, like all other things depends for its being on God's having created it. Given the constraints of divine simplicity and immutability, it is clear that God cannot, after having created the world, create a parallel set of possibilia. So if possible states of affairs exist, they must exist as features of reality—that is, either they exist as modes of created substance, or as ideas in God's mind: "If Descartes' possibles are just created thinking or extended substances, then presumably they are actuals and not possibles."[13] On the other hand, by trying to locate possibilities in God's mind we run into problems as well. If possibilities are ideas in God's mind, and God's intellect is identical with God's will, God's creative power, and so forth (by DDS), then the object of God's intellect must also have been willed into creation, and thus is no longer possible but actual.

It is of course possible that the actualist is correct in his assessment, and that Descartes is either helping himself to claims he is not entitled to, or that he is falling back on the conceptualist account of "possible."[14] I want to suggest that we need not embrace either of these options. I have argued above that true ideas conform to reality, and that in instances of clear and distinct perception, those ideas are true. Insofar as they are true, there must be a truth-maker for the ideas. I have argued that the conceptualist account fails as an account of such truth-makers. I have also argued that while clear and distinct perceptions guarantee the veracity of the ideas, they do not actually help the finite mind grasp the truth-maker for the idea. To wit, in many cases the truth-maker is an ineffable being, or an implication of God's power which itself is far beyond what the finite mind can comprehend. I want again to appeal to this strategy. There can be no doubt that Descartes does speak of the clear and distinct perception of possibility, I have mentioned two instances above. Insofar as such

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[13] (Cunning, Descartes' Modal Metaphysics 2014).

[14] See *Second Replies* (CSM II, p. 107).

perceptions are true, and they must be if they have been clearly and distinctly conceived, there must be something to which the ideas conform. What it is that the ideas conform to need not be something that finite minds can grasp. There are clearly limits to what finite minds are capable of grasping; I argued in Chapter Three that God's nature is just one instance of this general trend. Here we find another. If finite beings understand the truth of some possibility claims, then there must be something that makes them true, even if what makes them true is beyond their grasp.

The Separability of Mind and Body

The Cartesian argument for the real distinction between mind and body is traditionally taken to be quite straightforward. Descartes offers the 'conceivability-possibility principle,' which states that "everything I clearly and distinctly understand is capable of being created by God so as to correspond exactly with my understanding of it."[15] Next, because one can conceive of two things existing independent of one another, they can so exist, at least if God makes it so. Descartes established in the *Second Meditation* that the self is essentially a thinking thing that does not rely on anything physical in order to exist, and established in the *Sixth Meditation* that the idea of body is essentially as a non-thinking and extended substance, thus the two ideas are distinct. Since they are conceived to be possibly distinct, they are really distinct.

This is the traditional conception of the argument, and there are good philosophical reasons for reconstructing it this way. I have argued elsewhere that properly understood, *Cartesian* substance dualism only makes sense in the world of Cartesian physics, and perhaps that is why the contemporary philosophers characterize the argument this way.[16] I do not

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[15] *Sixth Meditation* (CSM II, p. 54). While the name "conceivability-possibility principle" is fairly widespread in the literature, I am referring to Gendler and Hawthorne's reconstruction (Gendler and Hawthorne 2002), p. 22.

[16] (Phillips, Beretta and Whitaker 2014).

think that the above reconstruction is actually Descartes's argument for a few reasons. First, Descartes's meditator does not, at the time of offering the conceivability-possibility principle think that she has actually established that physical things exist. She says "I rightly conclude that my essence consists entirely in my being a thinking thing. And although perhaps (or rather, as I shall soon say, assuredly) I have a body that is very closely joined to me…"[17] Second, Descartes is unequivocal regarding his assertion that there are modes of the mind that, even though they are in the mind, are present *only* because of the mind's being joined to the body. For example, he discusses the chiliagon and the triangle in terms of a discussion of the faculties of imagination and sensation being modes of thought, but firmly maintains that these faculties arise only in virtue of the substantial union of mind and body.[18] Finally, this section plays an important role in Descartes's argument establishing the existence of physical stuff *at all*, as opposed to physical stuff *as separate from* the mind. With that said, we are left with two distinct (and clear?) questions: 1. What is Descartes's argument for the existence of material bodies? 2. What is Descartes's argument for the claim that mind and body are different and separable substances? I will not here have room to fully address the first question: there is an enormous literature seeking to fully explicate what the Cartesian argument for the existence of body, and to fully delve into that debate is beyond the scope of what I can consider here.[19] Such a discussion, while important, would move us too far from the focus of this chapter—Cartesian knowledge of possibility. I will, however point to a few key issues concerning the argument for the existence of bodies in an attempt to lay the groundwork for answering the second question concerning the separability of mind and body.

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[17] *Sixth Meditation* (CSM II p. 54).

[18] See, (Brown 2014).

[19] See for example, (Garber, Descartes and Method in 1637 1988); (Garber, Descartes and Experiment in the Discourse and Essays 1993); (Garber, Descartes and Occasionalism 1993); and (Garber, Semel in Vita: The Scientific Background to Descartes' Meditations 1986).

In the *Third Meditation*, Descartes's meditator gives us a hint as to the way that Descartes understands the concept of substance. She says, "For instance, I think that a stone is a substance, that is to say, a thing that is suitable for existing in itself; and likewise I think that I too am a substance."[20] Of course, the meditator is not yet a full-blown Cartesian, and if she were, she would understand that finite modes of extension, such as rocks, do not really count as individual substances.[21] Still, what we see here is something that looks a lot like what Descartes believes to be the proper definition of substance: A thing which is capable of existing without relying on anything else for its existence. To put it another way—a substance is that which can exist *independent* of anything else.[22] In this quote we see the right concept of substance, but the meditator is still unclear about what kinds of things are good examples of substances.

The *Sixth Meditation* begins with yet another refinement of the concept of the self/mind and what it involves. The meditator tries to once again guide us to a better grasp of what ideas count as clear and distinct and what ideas are confused or obscure. To do this, she directs us to think about, and indeed try to picture a triangle, a pentagon, and a chiliagon. Recalling the discussion in the *Fifth Meditation* of the "true and immutable natures" of geometric concepts, this time the meditator notices something very different about the concepts. Instead of focusing on the fact that the ideas have discoverable features—which are decidedly not features created by finite minds—this time she notices that accompanying the ideas of triangles and pentagons are pictures in the imagination that seem to accurately represent those figures. Yet, no such *picture* can be clearly or distinctly generated for the chiliagon. This is another exercise to get us to understand the difference between what is

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[20] *Third Meditation* (CSM II, p. 30).

[21] See the discussion of the distinction between a mode and the substance in which that mode inheres in *Principles* I. 61-65 (CSM I, p. 213-216).

[22] Cf. *Principles* I.51 (CSM I, p. 210).

clear and distinct, and what is not. The use of the intellect alone will not involve the picturing of the object of thought—instead it will involve *only* a transcendent grasp of the content itself abstracted away from the sensible images found in the imagination.

> […] when the mind understands, it in some way turns toward itself and inspects one of the ideas which are within it; but when it imagines, it turns towards the body, and looks at something in the body which conforms to an idea understood by the mind or perceived by the senses.[23]

How can the mind turn to the body if we still don't know that bodies exists? What the meditator likely means here is the *idea* of the body—which the meditator has been having all along. Recall the wax discussion from the *Second Meditation*. There the meditator drew a distinction between *seeming* to see and *seeing* a body—a distinction which was almost immediately run together. The meditator elaborates, "I can, as I say, easily understand that this is how imagination comes about, if the body exists; and since there is no other equally suitable way of explaining imagination that comes to mind, I can make a probable conjecture that the body exists."[24] Of course, we all know that probability is insufficient for knowledge on the Cartesian picture, but as I argued in Chapter Three, the fact that something is not yet certain for the meditator does not preclude the possibility that she is drawing conclusions about bodies external to her. This case is no different—the meditator makes a probable conjecture that body exists, and concludes that mind and body are really distinct substances, even though the real existence of body is not established until later in the meditation. As is common in the *Meditations*, the meditator initially draws the conclusion that the mind and body are distinct in the conceivability possibility passage, but then walks back the strength of that conclusion. She turns her attention to the way in which mind and body are closely united and intermixed. It is here that she attends to the argument for the real existence of body.

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[23] *Sixth Meditation* (CSM II, p. 51).

[24] Ibid.

But what is the argument for the separability of substances despite their actual union? That argument is implicitly stated in the argument for the existence of physical substance. Basically, once Descartes has established that physical substance exists, it is difficult not to notice that all of the qualities that define physical substance are features that not only do not belong to minds, but also *cannot* belong to a mental substance. Indeed the *pure intellect* (the transcendent, rare, mental apprehension of the true and immutable natures of geometric figures, God, and the self) has nothing to do with bodies. The only reason that we have ideas of bodies, the meditator notes, is that there are contingent features of the mind, faculties that need not even be a part of the mind, yet could not exist without a mind—viz. the senses and the imagination. These faculties are modes of thought that depend on a mind to exist, but that serve a purpose quite distinct from the intellect and the will; to offer (often-confused) ideas of extended objects and, more importantly, to preserve the mind-body union. Finite minds do not need the senses or imagination to continue to exist—all that is required are the intellect and will. According to the *Fourth Meditation*, finite minds will never go wrong if they focus on what the intellect provides the will as clear and distinct ideas. Despite this seeming to be the central conclusion, the mind's instances of pure intellection are rare. As Descartes infamously tells Elisabeth, he only concerns himself with the objects of the pure intellect for a few hours a year. While it is tempting to read Descartes's comments to Elisabeth as somehow disingenuous, I think that there are systematic reasons to think that he made that claim in earnest. As one commentator has suggested, "while it is possible for us cognitively to transcend that state to engage in pure thought or thought aided only by the imagination, it can only be sustained for short periods of time and is, in a way, unnatural."[25]

[25] (Brown 2014), p. 249.

If the features of the mind that are concerned with physical stuff are inessential features of the mind, then there is no *necessary* link between mind and body. But if there is no necessary link, then God can certainly separate them, for God can do anything we clearly and distinctly understand, and what makes the idea of mind distinct from the idea of body is that it precludes anything physical. Recall that on the theological mysterian position that I am advocating, when we recognize that the innate concepts we possess stand in certain relations to one another (be it entailment, inconsistency, or otherwise) these relations inform us that there is something to which they do conform. So when we notice that mind and body have essences that have nothing in common, we recognize that they *can* exist separate from one another; that they are *substances*. Yet by the end of the *Sixth Meditation* the meditator intuits three *distinct* ideas: extended substance, mental substance, and the substantial union of the two (self). Later in the meditation, after establishing not only the existence of physical substance but also establishing the substantial union of the mind to the body, "not merely… as a sailor is present in a ship, but very closely joined and, as it were, intermingled with it…"[26] the meditator returns to an explicit discussion of what makes the mind different from the body.

The conceivability-possibility argument, as it is often reconstructed as *the* argument for mind-body dualism—finite minds recognize that God is very powerful and can create anything they clearly and distinctly conceive so as to correspond with those conceptions, the mind and body are thus different—but, textually, there are actually two arguments for the separability. That is, at the point in the *Sixth Meditation* where the meditator offers the conceivability-possibility argument, the meditator has yet to establish the existence of physical bodies. So here, as in the case of the wax passage, the meditator is only entitled to

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26 *Sixth Meditation* (CSM II, p. 56).

conclude some sort of probable subjunctive conditional. In this, the meditator is entitled to the claim that *if* she were to have a physical body, her mind *would* not be identical to it.

> The *Meditations* are addressed, in part, to a very specific audience that Descartes knows quite well, to the unconverted, readers full of prejudice for their senses and for the material world, and these digressions are very important to convince them that the arguments that they are inclined to accept, arguments that take for granted a faith in the senses, argument that take for granted a priority in belief in the external world – these arguments Descartes wants to show are mistaken. And the way he does this is by letting the meditator try to show that they work, only to show that they don't. This is the function of the failed argument for the existence of body in Meditation III, for the wax example of Meditation II, and for other arguments in the *Meditations*.[27]

Following Garber, it would not be surprising to see the meditator introduce an argument early in the *Meditation*, only to show that, while it is quite compelling on its face, it is insufficient to establish the conclusion with the proper certainty, only to build upon it later. And that is precisely what the meditator does. Recall that in the conceivability-possibility argument, the meditator is only in a position to know for certain that she either has a body closely conjoined to her mind, "or some creature more noble than a body, in which case it will contain eminently whatever is to be found in the ideas [of body]."[28] Once the meditator has established that it is impossible for God to deceive her about the existence of bodies, she turns not to the *distinction* between mind and body, but to their *union*. After establishing the union of mind and body, the meditator returns to offer a further proof of their separability, *not* their actual separation. After having established the substantial union of mind and body, the meditator offers the following, second argument for their separability. She says,

> The first observation I make at this point is that there is a great difference between the mind and the body, inasmuch as the body is by its very nature always divisible, while the mind is utterly indivisible. For when I consider the mind, or myself in so far as I am merely a thinking thing, I am unable to distinguish any parts of

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[27] (Garber, Descartes and Method in 1637 1988), p. 233.

[28] *Sixth Meditation* (CSM II, p. 55).

> myself; I understand myself to be something quite simple and complete. Although the whole mind seems united to the whole body, I recognize that if a foot or arm or any other part of the body is cut off, nothing has thereby been taken away from the mind. As for the faculties of willing, of understanding, of sensory perception and so on, these cannot be termed parts of the mind, since it is one and the same mind that wills, and understands and has sensory perceptions. By contrast, there is no corporeal or extended thing that I can ever think of which in my thought I cannot easily divide into parts; and this very fact makes me understand that it is divisible. *This one argument would be enough to show me that the mind is completely different from the body*, even if I did not already know as much from other considerations."[29]

If the meditator had already sufficiently established the separability of mind from body, then why should she offer another argument on the basis of the clearly and distinctly understood essences of the different substances? Again, following Garber above, it is entirely plausible that Descartes was intending the passage to fill out the prior conceivability-possibility argument—now that the meditator is in a position to recognize that her mind is actually closely tied to a physical body, she is in a position to conclude entirely that the mind is not identical to the body. It is also plausible, and perfectly consistent, that Descartes "is aware that he is teacher of a variety of minds"[30] and is thus trying to build further evidence that despite the unity of the mind and body, they are still *separable*.

What happens in this passage is an affirmation of the antecedent of the subjunctive conditional stated in the conclusion of the conceivability-possibility argument. That is, when she concludes that she does have a physical body, she can call back upon the fact that it is distinct from her mind. And in order to drive home the point, she provides us with implications that follow from the clear apprehension of the nature of mind as a unified, unextended, indivisible being, and body being essentially divisible extension. Since mind and body hold incompatible essential features, the two cannot be identical, even if they are closely tied together.

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[29] *Sixth Meditation* (CSM II, p. 59).

[30] (Cunning, Argument and Persuasion in Descartes's Meditations 2010), p. 29.

There are several reasons to highlight Descartes's second argument for the separability of mind and body and his discussion of the substantial union of mind and body. First, the traditional argument focuses too heavily on the *distinction* between mind and body *qua* substances, and that focus often results in a cartoonish picture of Descartes's view. Margaret Wilson has argued that there is an important difference between the view Descartes actually held, and the view that bears his name. "More precisely, the 'Cartesian dualist' is supposed to argue that…we must conclude that experiences are never the same thing as physical states."[31] Yet, as Wilson notes later, such a view wildly oversimplifies the Cartesian project, and ignores the systematic nature of Descartes's commitments to natural science. "For Descartes, of course, was firmly committed to the possibility of physiological accounts of the various emotions, sensations, and patters of reflex behavior, as well as of imagination and what he calls the corporeal memory."[32] Along this same line of argument, I have noted that the meditator appeals to the unity of the mind in order to distinguish it from anything merely physical. Included in the list of attributes the meditator finds present to the mind are the modes of sense perception and imagination. What is initially striking about the presence of these attributes is that they arise, according to Descartes, only because of the mind's union with the body. Yet they are still, in some sense, part of a *unified* mind. Regardless of how Descartes actually understood mind's relation to body, philosophers have not missed many opportunities to uncharitably characterize the Cartesian picture. Daniel Dennett even literally drew cartoon balloons being zapped with lightning bolts to represent the soul somehow magically interacting with the pineal gland![33] Of course, even apart from the wildly uncharitable permutations that the "Cartesian view" has undergone in recent

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[31] (Wilson 1978), p. 197.

[32] (Wilson 1978), p. 199.

[33] See (Dennett 1991), p.34-5.

years, there is still an important question that needs to be addressed—how does the interaction between the substances work? To that end I would like to make one more point regarding Descartes's argument for the distinction between mind and body. The traditional reconstructions of his arguments for substance dualism push him into a position where his responses make little to no sense whatsoever, or worse, that he is simply refusing to recognize the problem altogether.[34] Let us consider the way in which Elisabeth takes Descartes to task for the interaction problem. Descartes says that we clearly and distinctly understand that physical stuff exists without minds, and that minds *can* exist without bodies, thus making them *independent* of one another, and therefore *different substances*. Yet, the meditator says that finite beings possess the faculties of sense and imagination because they are tightly bound to a physical body; very much unlike the way a sailor resides in a ship. The senses and imagination, the story goes, serve to preserve the mind-body union, a union that "despite the real distinction of mind and body, is not something Descartes thinks can be reductively analyzed in terms of the substances of which it is composed."[35]

Mind-Body 'Interaction' and Separability

The *Sixth Meditation* meditator gives us a nice story about how the body is a physical machine and how physical machines are prone to break down. What is unclear, however, is just how it is that the distinct (immaterial) substance can interact with this machine. After all, at the conclusion of the argument the substances have literally no features in common, and given Cartesian physics, it is unclear how unextended substance can causally interact with that substance which is *only* extended. The meditator seems to just take for granted that they

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[34] See (Garber, Understanding Interaction: What Descartes Should Have Told Elisabeth 1983). He notes that in response to Elisabeth, Descartes says that, "[w]hat is called for is a bit of therapy, not argument or explanation. Go about your daily life, and you will find the appropriate notion, just as the unreflective man in the street does. This is how Descartes tries to explain himself" (p. 19).

[35] (Brown 2014), p. 244.

do—the mind and body are closely tied, and changes in one affect changes in the other; evidently mechanically, somehow. This, of course, is the infamous mind-body problem. It is made, I think, the most acute by the Cartesian formulation, and Elisabeth's statement of the problem is the most devastating. It is worth quoting in full.

> I beseech you tell me how the soul of a man (since it is but a thinking substance) can determine the spirits of the body to produce voluntary actions. For it seems every determination of movement happens from an impulsion of the thing moved, according to the manner in which it is pushed by that which moves it, or else, depends on the qualification and figure of the superficies of the latter. Contact is required for the first two conditions, and extension for the third. You entirely exclude extension from your notion of the soul, and contact seems to me incompatible with an immaterial thing. That is why I ask of you a definition of the soul more particular than in your Metaphysic—that is to say, for a definition of the substance separate from its action, thought.[36]

The resulting correspondence between Descartes and Elisabeth is fascinating and somewhat odd. On the face of it, Descartes never really provides a clear answer to Elisabeth's challenge. What he does offer is the sketch of an account that, if I am right about Cartesian modal epistemology, makes at least *some* sense, and significantly more sense than some contemporary philosophers of mind give him credit for. After all, the interaction problem is clearly something of which Descartes himself was aware, and despite some appearances, he does at least *attempt* to provide an answer.

Descartes's response to Elisabeth's worry is developed in two phases, neither of which is sufficiently explanatory on its face. The first response Descartes offers is an appeal to "primitive notions" of which he thinks that we often confuse four: number, duration, etc., which applies to all beings; the mind by itself, or thought; the body by itself, or extension (which entails motion and shape); and the union of mind and body, "on which depends our notion of the soul's power to move the body, and the body's power to act on the soul and

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[36] Elisabeth to Descartes, 6 May, 1643 in (Bohemia 1994).

cause its sensations and passions."[37] What this is supposed to mean is not obvious. Equally obscure, is how this is supposed to help solve the problem of mind-body interaction. But Descartes continues to the second phase,

> For instance, when we suppose that heaviness is a real quality, of which all we know is that it has the power to move the body that possesses it toward the centre of the earth, we have no difficulty in conceiving how it moves this body or how it is joined to it. We never think that this motion is produced by a real contact between two surfaces, since we find, from our own inner experience, that we possess a notion that is ready-made for forming the conception in question. Yet I believe we misuse this notion when we apply it to heaviness, which – as I hope to show in my *Physics* – is not anything really distinct from body.[38]

This portion of Descartes's response makes acute that his formulation of the way distinct substances interact makes sense only on the plenum view that is Descartes's own. For Descartes, the idea of forces acting at a distance was inconceivable, so the very notion of gravitation, taken as a *force,* inexplicable in mechanical terms would have been inconceivable for him.[39] Instead, what is supposed to be doing the explanatory work is the simple notion we have of the mind *as conjoined* to the body. This idea, however, is importantly different from both the idea of mind, taken alone and the idea of body, taken alone. Recall that above I mentioned that Descartes's method is to begin with the simplest notions, as those are most easily grasped, and then to build up our systematic knowledge on the basis of those. This is precisely what Descartes takes himself to be doing in trying to explain the mind-body union; he warns Elisabeth that "all human knowledge consists solely in clearly distinguishing these notions and attaching each of them only to the things to which it pertains."[40]

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[37] Descartes to Elisabeth, 21 May, 1643 (CSMK p. 218).

[38] Ibid.

[39] See for example, (Westfall 1977), and (Phillips, Beretta and Whitaker 2014).

[40] Descartes to Elisabeth, 21 May, 1643 (CSMK, p. 218).

Thus it seems that much of the confusion concerning the mind-body interaction derives from conflating the distinct simple notions of mind, body, and the union of mind and body. In fact, the issue is not in making sense of how it is that these two *distinct substances* "interact," because in order for them to be interacting, they must be separate already in some important sense.[41] But according to Descartes's answer, "the idea of [the substantial union of mind and body] cannot, for example, be derived from the ideas of mind and body considered jointly, but has to be known on its own terms, and *a posteriori*."[42] In the conceivability-possibility argument taken alone in Descartes's *Sixth Meditation* argument for the separability of the mind from the body, the conclusion seems to be not that finite minds have several distinct notions and recognize that despite the separ*ability* of mind and body, the mind and body are not actually distinct things. Rather the conclusion is often characterized as, "I am not an extended thing."[43] But this is decidedly not the meditator's (nor Descartes's) final word on the subject. This is where the view of modal knowledge can help us, but let me be clear—I am not here trying to defend Descartes's arguments. I do not think that they work, and I am not a substance dualist. What I do think is that, given the Cartesian system, the arguments are less problematic and the supposed interaction between mind and body, while still mysterious, is not cartoonish, given Descartes's views on modality and modal knowledge. After all, since the Cartesian conclusion is that finite beings (themselves substantial unions) are made up of a combination of two substances that are possibly but not actually separate, we need to make sense of the claim that the substances *can*

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[41] See, (Garber, Understanding Interaction: What Descartes Should Have Told Elisabeth 1983); he argues, "As a consequence of [the real union between mind and body], strictly speaking, one should not talk about a *causal interaction* between two different things, a mind and a body; one should talk about the *causal explanation* of certain behaviors or states of a *single thing*, the mind-body union, in terms of mental acts of will or the physical states of the body" (p. 17).

[42] (Brown 2014), p. 244.

[43] (Van Cleve, Conceivability and the Cartesian Argument for Dualism 1983), P. 35.

be separated and exist without one another despite the fact that they are intricately conjoined.

I pointed out above that there are modes of finite minds that exist only in virtue of finite embodiment, the senses and imagination. These are, the meditator informs us, modes, and as modes, have to exist in a substance. But, since these modes only come about in virtue of the mind's being unified with the body, the modes do not depend solely on mind, and do not depend solely on body. If they depended on body alone, then there should, in principle be bodies that are capable of some kind of thought (specifically, sense perception and mental imaging). Descartes is quite explicit that matter is inert in every way, so that cannot be the case. If these modes depended entirely on the mind, then the proper objects of sense perception would not be bodies—as the objects of the intellect alone are non-physically manifested transcendent objects (God, for example).

> What Descartes needs is a subject for sensory predicates which is neither the mind nor the body and certainly not some third thing distinct from either of those (for what could it be?), but something that is *both* mind and body. That is the only way to capture how it is that there could be thoughts that depend on the movements in the body and *vice versa*. The subject of sensory predicates is the *union* of mind and body. […] The important point is that the special subject of these irreducible modes is not one that Descartes can draw from his official ontology of basic substances, and hence he needs to conceive of the union as *sui generis*.[44]

While these faculties are modes of the immaterial mind in some way, they are closely tied to the physical body. How exactly they interact with sense organs is not something that is entirely explicable; it is clear, however that they work together in some important way. At this point it may be helpful to appeal to our distinct, simple idea of the union of mind and body that Descartes tells Elisabeth finite beings possess. If finite beings relax their intuition

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[44] (Brown 2014), p. 248. Cf. (Garber, Understanding Interaction: What Descartes Should Have Told Elisabeth 1983); "The account that Descartes gives of the scholastic theory of heaviness makes the primitive notion of mind-body unity and the correlative notion of mind-body interaction *conceptually basic* in an extremely interesting sense" (p. 21).

and instead fall back upon what nature (as opposed to the *natural light*) teaches, they will recognize *that* mind and body are unified, even if the *how* is not immediately clear. The recognition that mind and body are unified is, if we follow the Cartesian system of discovery, a simple notion that is "known only obscurely by the intellect, or even the intellect aided by the imagination."[45] Elisabeth essentially tried to understand the union of mind and body in the wrong terms. She seems to be holding before her mind the individual and distinct ideas of mind and body that Descartes sought to differentiate in the *Meditations*. She tried to get clear on the 'interaction' between them while maintaining their real distinction. But to make sense of a *sui generis* notion, in this case, the union of mind and body, *through* two other basic concepts is impossible for a finite cognition. Descartes even says that ultimately, we cannot really understand the substantial union of mind and body, rather we can only understand *that* we are a substantial union. Pursuing the union by way of the pure intellect will only confuse the issue. To that end Descartes notes,

> Metaphysical thoughts, which exercise the pure intellect, help to familiarize us with the notion of the soul; and the study of mathematics, which exercises mainly the imagination in the consideration of shapes and motions accustoms us to form very distinct notions of body. But it is the ordinary course of life and conversation, and abstention from meditation and from the study of things which exercise the imagination, that teaches us how to conceive the union of the soul and body.[46]

That is, to understand the union of mind and body is not to grasp intellectually how it is that distinct substances can interact. Instead, as Garber suggested, it is to *live* as a union—to recognize *that* mind and body interact—"that is why people who never philosophize and use only their senses have no doubt that the soul moves the body and the body moves the soul. They regard both of them as a single thing, that is to say, they conceive their union…"[47] If

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[45] Descartes to Elisabeth, 28 June, 1643 (CSMK, p. 227).

[46] Ibid.

[47] Ibid.

Descartes thinks that the best way to understand the mind-body union is to stop thinking about it and just live one's life, then he seems to be suggesting that philosophy, while able to help us better understand particular notions is not all that helpful a tool in the end. This somewhat surprising conclusion fits with the view that I have been building regarding the scope and power of clear and distinct perception. It is really not a very powerful tool in the Cartesian system. In the case of the mind-body union, Descartes says that we better understand how mind and body interact by avoiding deep intellectual thought! We simply do not really understand, in a deep, rationalist way, how they interact; we just recognize that they do.

In the same correspondence with Elisabeth, Descartes notes that finite minds get themselves in trouble not only by failing to appropriately distinguish the three simple notions (mind, body, and the union of mind and body), but also when the human mind tries to grasp simultaneously the real distinguishability between mind and body *and* their union.

> It does not seem to me that the human mind is capable of forming a very distinct conception of both the distinction between soul and the body and their union; for to do this it is necessary to conceive them as a single thing and at the same time to conceive them as two things; and this is absurd.[48]

Of course, conceiving of the union and distinction between mind and body is straightforwardly to conceive a contradiction. So what exactly is happening here? In the *Sixth Meditation*, the meditator cites God's power as the evidence that the two substances *can* be separated, but immediately notes that she need not concern herself with making sense of what kind of power is required to execute such a separation. She need only recognize that she has distinct ideas of each substance, and that God can make anything she clearly and distinctly conceives correspond to her conception. It seems, then that the meditator is

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[48] Descartes to Elisabeth, 28 June, 1643 (CSMK, p. 227).

directly aware of some modal fact in this case; the fact that mind and body, despite not being currently separate, are capable of existing apart from one another.

What makes it true that mind and body *can* be separated may be God's inconceivable power, or it may be something else, Descartes never really says. On the face of it, God's power alone does not correspond in any way to the idea that mind and body can come apart, but it is unclear what could *correspond* to such a truth. As I have advocated, the Cartesian should merely be content with recognizing the truth, and understand that *something* conforms to the idea. What is likely is that God's inconceivable power is the best explanation that finite beings are capable of coming to understand, even if it does not account for the truth-maker of the idea. As I argued above and in Chapter Three, Descartes need not concern himself with what serves as the truth-maker for the separability of mind and body. Insofar as he recognizes clearly that the two substances' essences are distinct, he knows that they can be other than they currently are. As I mentioned, finite minds are not in a position to grasp God's power, let alone any implications that follow from it. Still, finite beings are in a position to *see* that certain things are possible. That the mind and body, though currently unified, *can* be separated is one such example.

The Apparent Contradiction

Even if on Descartes's view finite minds can apprehend the fact that distinct substances *can* be separated, what is there to be said about the seemingly blatant contradiction that he glosses over when discussing the interaction problem with Elisabeth (that mind and body are composed of separate but unified substances)? It is here that we can appeal to the asymmetrical relationship between the conceivability-possibility relationship and the inconceivability-impossibility relationship. That is, since finite minds clearly and distinctly understand the essences of each substance as being separate from one another, they are in a position to *know* that each substance *can* exist on its own. Finite minds, Descartes suggests, also recognize, clearly and distinctly, that their own existence is as a

substantial unification of two substances that have nothing in common; this is apparent by attending to mental faculties that arise solely for the purpose of preserving the mind-body union: the senses and imagination. In virtue of being able to clearly and distinctly understand each of these claims individually, finite beings can grasp the truth of each of them. Where the finite being falls short is in being able to hold before her mind, simultaneously, all three of these simple ideas. That finite beings cannot coherently entertain the separation between mind and body and their substantial union at once speaks not to the *impossibility* of the truth of both ideas, but rather only to the limitations of the finite cognition. That finite minds cannot make sense of *how* these ideas can be simultaneously true is unsurprising, however, if we consider the various commitments Descartes has regarding God's power and inconceivability. That finite beings cannot conceive of the way in which two distinct substances can be temporarily unified, all while the substances maintain the capacity for separation says nothing about what God is capable of doing. It is in virtue of the inconceivable power that God possesses that this is true, and the limitations essential to finite cognition do not mean that the unity and separability are simultaneously impossible. In fact, unity and separability *must* be consistent in the actual world, as the unity and separability of the substances are both clearly and distinctly understood truths.

The discussion in Chapter Three of the similarity between clear and distinct perception and divine revelation can provide us with reason to think that the problem here is not as severe at it might appear. Descartes is explicit throughout his corpus that there are contradictions that appear to be impossible. Still, the moral to take away from these contradictions, Descartes suggests, is not that they are absolutely impossible, rather "if we would know the immensity of [God's] power we should not put these thoughts before our minds…"[49] The mind-body union, I suggest is one such example. After all, utilizing the

[49] Descartes to Mesland, 2 May, 1644 (CSMK, p. 235).

Cartesian method of breaking down ideas into simple concepts, the content of which cannot be mistaken, finite minds recognize that they have distinctly mental features, a properly basic understanding of physical bodies as *essentially* extended, and a clear grasp of the union of mind and body. Each of these ideas, taken alone is both basic, and clear and distinct. By the Cartesian system, each of these ideas is true. Yet, only if finite minds try to hold all three together before their minds will they run into trouble. Descartes is clear in his suggestion that finite beings are best suited leaving the mysteries of the facts entailed by God's omnipotence alone. I noted above that the light of nature is not really all that powerful a tool in the Cartesian system. It is like the light of grace in that it gets finite beings to the truth of some proposition, but does not help to elucidate *how* that idea is true, or what makes it true.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have illustrated several key issues concerning Cartesian modal knowledge by way of Descartes's own method. I used examples of instances of modal truths that finite beings clearly and distinctly grasp to illustrate that there are *some* instances of not only actual truths but also actually necessary truths that finite beings *know* unproblematically. The necessity of these truths, I argue, *cannot* be located merely in finite concepts. Instead the necessity must be made so in the same way that other truths are made so—by something actually existing, though Descartes need not know what. Building on the discussion of the limits of clear and distinct perceptions from Chapter Three, I argued that instances of eternal truths are, and always will be true. What makes them true and confers their status as necessary is something to which the ideas and relations of ideas conform, but Descartes need not have an account of what that is. From here, I tried to illustrate that there is an apparent asymmetry between that which finite beings can clearly and distinctly conceive of as being *possible* (the clarity and distinctness of which guarantees the veracity of the conception), and those ideas finite beings cannot clearly conceive of.

This discussion pointed to a puzzle present in Descartes's description of the real distinction and simultaneous unity between mind and body. There I was able to illustrate that there is at least one *merely apparent* contradiction, that holds true. The 'contradiction' arises largely in light of the limits on finite cognition. In light of this merely apparent contradiction, Descartes advises that finite beings "remember that our minds must be regarded as finite, while God is infinite and beyond our comprehension," and that as a result, "such objections will not cause us any difficulty."[50] That is, unless finite beings come to have some manner of divine revelation, they should merely recognize that mind and body are separable substances, but are unified in a way that cannot be fully grasped *while* considering them separately. That finite beings can clearly and distinctly understand certain modal facts provides them a bridge to real possibilities and necessities, even if what makes the possibilities real is ineffable. Unless finite beings come to have a clear perception of the possibility of a seemingly contradictory states of affairs, the epistemically responsible mental behavior is to recognize that it will not come to pass in the actual world. In those cases where seeming impossibilities have been revealed, the truth-maker must be some ineffable implication of God's inconceivable nature. In the next chapter I will provide another example of Cartesian possibility that finite beings can *know* of. Incidentally, in this case too, an apparent contradiction arises concerning modal facts. As I noted at the outset of this chapter, there is a tension concerning the freedom of finite beings with divine preordination.

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[50] *Meditations*, Preface to the Reader (CSM II, p.8).

CHAPTER FIVE: FREE WILL HE OR FREE WON'T HE? CONTEXTUALIZING DESCARTES'S ACCOUNT OF THE WILL

Introduction

In Chapter Four I introduced Descartes's account of the freedom of the will that finite beings possess and suggested that it presents a nice example illustrating the position I have advocated in Chapter Three. I argued that, since there are instances of clearly and distinctly grasped *possibilities*, that there must be something that makes them true; what makes them true, however, is likely not within the grasp of any finite being. Of course, not *all* thoughts regarding possibility are created equally. Only those that result from clear and distinct perceptions guarantee the existence of a truth-maker. That said, however, there are some cases where finite beings clearly and distinctly understand that something is possible. One such case was the topic of Chapter Four, the separability of mind and body. Another such case, I will here argue, concerns the freedom of finite beings. The debate concerning Descartes's account of the freedom of finite wills is complex, and much of the interpretive work spends too little time discussing the implications that Cartesian modal metaphysics has for it, and tries to situate Descartes in the contemporary debate. I will argue here that Descartes's considered view does not cleanly map onto the current discussion of freedom, and that, in many ways Descartes's discussion of finite freedom parallels his discussion of the separability of mind and body.

In light of a careful consideration of the scope and power Descartes attributes to created (finite) wills, there appears to be a tension in his account of freedom. On one hand, Descartes clearly states in the *Fourth Meditation* that we are most free when we cannot help but assent to the truth of a self-evident proposition. On the other hand, in the *Principles* and again in the *Passions*, Descartes appears to maintain that finite minds have complete control over the operation of the will—i.e. finite beings can decide whether to assent to the truth of a proposition or whether to withhold belief entirely. In the former case, it sounds as if

Descartes offers a compatibilist account of freedom of the will, and in the latter case, it sounds as if he offers an incompatibilist account. As a result of these putative textual ambiguities, how one ought to understand Descartes's view regarding the scope and operation of the will is a matter of considerable scholarly debate. Tierno suggests that Descartes's view may well be incoherent;[1] Spinoza,[2] Leibniz,[3] Wee[4] and Alanen[5] argue that Descartes was a radical libertarian; Ragland has offered interpretive reasons to think that Descartes must be an incompatibilist, but not a full-blown libertarian;[6] and Chappell,[7] Sleigh, Della Rocca and Chappell together,[8] Nelson and Cunning together,[9] and Cunning separately[10] have argued that Descartes is best understood as a compatibilist.

In Chapters Three and Four, I argued that present in the Cartesian modal system is a mechanism that can account for certain *seemingly* contradictory, yet individually self-evident

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[1] (Tierno 1997), see specifically Chapter 3, H.2 (pp. 48-55).

[2] See (Spinoza 2006) *Ethics,* III, preface. "I know, indeed, that the renowned Descartes, though he too believed that the mind has absolute power over its actions, does explain human emotions through their first causes, and has also zealously striven to show how the mind can have absolute control over the emotions."

[3] See (Leibniz 1985) Theodicy §112. I should be remiss not to note that in early modern terms, the issue regarding freedom of the will is more complicated than is sometimes thought. That said, I mention these criticisms of Descartes not with a full endorsement but rather because these passages are often considered straightforward criticisms of the Cartesian account of freedom.

[4] (Wee, Descartes and Leibniz on Human Free-Will and the Ability to Do Otherwise 2006), and (Wee, The Fourth Meditation: Descartes and Libertarian Freedom 2014).

[5] (Alanen, Intuition, Assent and Necessity: The Question of Descartes's Psychologism 1999). Cf. (Alanen, Descartes's Concept of Mind 2003), specifically Chapter 7.8.

[6] (Ragland 2006).

[7] (Chappell 1994).

[8] (Sleigh Jr, Chappell and Della Rocca 1998).

[9] (Nelson and Cunning 1999).

[10] (Cunning, The First Meditation: Divine Omnipotence, Necessary Truths, and the Possibility of Radical Deception 2014).

truths. In this chapter I will argue that the Cartesian account of freedom is better understood through a careful consideration of Descartes's modal metaphysics, and that my theological mysterian position best makes sense of the putative tensions found therein. The points of textual evidence where Descartes explicitly considers the will, when taken alone is at best indeterminate; this fact necessitates a closer look at Descartes's systematic considerations—in particular his views on possibility and necessity. The various interpretations of the doctrine of the creation of the eternal truths can help us carve up what options were open to Descartes regarding freedom from within his own metaphysical system. In order for Descartes to be a libertarian of any stripe, there must exist the possibility that one can do otherwise. Without a proper understanding of the status of possibility in Cartesian metaphysics, we are not in a position to make sense of such possibilities. I will survey the interpretive strategies regarding Descartes's understanding of possibility and demonstrate the ways in which each interpretation influences the free-will debate. Indeed, the portions of the Cartesian theory of the will that lead Leibniz and Tierno to suggest that Descartes might have an incoherent view of human freedom can be resolved in much the same way that the mind-body problem is resolved. The central thesis of theological mysterianism is that there are certain things about which finite beings cannot say anything meaningful, given various Cartesian constraints. As such, they need to be clear about what they are saying when it appears that they are talking about those issues.[11] I will suggest that Descartes intends to limit the scope of his discussion to what is clear and distinct, which for modality includes the

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[11] See *Principles* I.74, "*The fourth case of error is that we attach our concepts to words which do not precisely correspond to real things*. Finally, because of the use of language, we tie all our concepts to the words used to express them; and when we store concepts in our memory we always simultaneously store the corresponding words. Later on we find the words easier to recall than the things; and because of this I tis very seldom that our concept of a thing is so distinct that we can separate it totally from our concept of the words involved. The thoughts of almost all people are more concerned with words than with things; and as a result people very often give their assent to words they do not understanding, thinking they once understood them, or that they got them from others who did understand them correctly" (CSM I. p. 221).

relation between properly understood concepts, and revealed modal facts concerning possibility. Regarding freedom, finite beings have two seemingly inconsistent clear and distinct perceptions: that finite beings experience freedom in some importantly robust sense, and that God preordains all things. I will argue that the asymmetry between the principles of conceivability-possibility and inconceivability-impossibility can resolve this apparent tension better than any rival views on modality.

The Contemporary Debate

In the literature regarding Descartes's account of freedom of the will there are roughly two camps: the incompatibilists, who maintain that freedom is incompatible with determinism (the view that every event is caused in some way or another), and compatibilists, who maintain that freedom is consistent with determinism. There is no question as to whether or not Descartes thought that finite beings were free; freedom plays an important role both explicitly and implicitly in Descartes's philosophy. The question is whether or not Descartes considered freedom in finite beings to be the kind of freedom that precludes the possibility of determinism. In nearly every passage where Descartes discusses finite wills explicitly, he limits the scope and power of the will to the realm of the mental. Consider this passage from the *Fourth Meditation*, where Descartes explains the nature of the will,

> [T]he will simply consists in our ability to do or not do something (that is, to affirm or deny, to pursue or avoid); or rather, it consists simply in the fact that when the intellect puts something forward for affirmation or denial or for pursuit or avoidance, our inclinations are such that we do not feel that we are determined by any external force. In order to be free, there is no need for me to be inclined both ways; on the contrary, the more I incline in one direction - either because I clearly understand that reasons of truth and goodness point this way, or because of a divinely produced disposition of my inmost thoughts - the freer is my choice.[12]

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[12] Descartes, *Meditations* (CSM II, p. 40). Cf. *Principles* I.32 where Descartes says, "*We possess only two modes of thinking: the perception of the intellect and the operation of the will.* [...] Sensory perception, imagination, and pure understanding are simply various modes of perception; desire, aversion,

Descartes, in his *Fourth Meditation*—well prior to his attempt to establish the real existence of material bodies—offers an account of the nature of the will. Were *physical determination* relevant to Descartes's thought regarding the will, one would expect this order to be reversed. This is important, because the majority of the discussion regarding Descartes's account of the will is not concerned with the mind's power over the body.[13] Furthermore, it is noteworthy that Descartes discusses the nature of the will as that faculty that acts on the information presented to it by the intellect and that it functions by affirming or denying, pursuing or avoiding, the information presented to it. In this section, I will discuss two forms of the incompatibilist interpretive strategy ("moderate" and "radical," respectively) and provide the smoking gun passages that support these readings without explicitly considering any discussion regarding the freedom of a finite being to act *physically* in whatever manner he or she pleases. I will also present a compatibilist interpretation and offer passages that seem to imply that Descartes was committed to determinism of some kind.

Moderate Incompatibilism

The debate between compatibilists and incompatibilists revolves around the notion of *determinism* and whether or not one can reconcile the truth of determinism with human freedom. The view that I call "Moderate Incompatibilism" is the view that while there are

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assertion, denial and doubt are various modes of willing." (CSM I, p. 204)

[13] While the current debate about freedom of the will independent of Descartes is primarily concerned with physical determinism, physical determinism is, for several reasons, not germane to Descartes scholarship. There is a wealth of literature on Descartes's famous problem of the interaction between substances. Though we need not delve into that subject here; it is sufficient to note that the clarity of Descartes's view regarding the interaction of mind and body left something to be desired. Even when pressed on the issue by Gassendi, and later, Elisabeth, Descartes was unable to say enough to allay their concerns. Furthermore, it is quite plausible that Descartes considers the will a purely mental faculty. While there is some interesting discussion to be found in the *Passions* where Descartes discusses mind-body interaction and the power the will has over the body, as I mentioned above, Descartes's discussion of the interaction problem is notoriously vague and unsatisfactory.

cases in which finite wills are determined (in an incompatibilist sense) in one way or another, not every act of the will is so determined. There are times, says the moderate incompatibilist, where the will is not compelled in any way, and is thus "free" in an incompatibilist sense. C. P. Ragland is the primary proponent of the moderate incompatibilist interpretation of Cartesian freedom. In order to motivate his incompatibilist reading, he characterizes determinism as follows,

> An event E is *determined* just in case the causes of E make the non-occurrence of E impossible--i.e. just in case the conditions causally necessary for E are also *sufficient* for E. *Determinism* is the view that *every* event is caused.[14]

Ragland rejects the claim that Descartes is committed to determinism on the basis that *some* events are not determined in the way that clear and distinct perceptions are (see *Fourth Meditation* quote above). In particular, it seems clear that when one does not clearly or distinctly perceive the truth of a proposition, she *can* withhold her assent. The following passage from the *Fourth Meditation* is often taken to support the claim that when a finite mind does clearly and distinctly perceive the truth of a proposition, one cannot help but assent to it:

> *I could not but judge* that something which I understood so clearly was true; but this was not because I was compelled so to judge by an external force, but because a great light in the intellect was followed by a great inclination in the will, and *thus the spontaneity and freedom of my belief was all the greater* in proportion to my lack of indifference.[15]

Descartes implies that freedom of the will resides in the determination of the will by the content of the intellect while having a clear and distinct perception—we are free when we have some great inclination (e.g. clear and distinct ideas) in the intellect and when we cannot but judge that something is the case; when we lack indifference. This is a striking claim.

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[14] (Ragland 2006), p. 59.

[15] (CSM II, p. 41) emphasis mine. See also, Descartes to Mesland 2 May, 1644 (CSMK p. 233)

Recall, however, the definition of determinism Ragland gave. According to Ragland's definition, the causal antecedents of an event must be both necessary and sufficient to determine that event, *and this is true for all events*. So it is not immediately clear whether or not our will is caused in *every* event by ideas presented by the intellect. In cases of unclear or indistinct perceptions, it certainly does seem that finite minds are not compelled in this way to act. The incomaptibilist is committed to there being viable alternate possibilities open to the will at certain times (minimally), and there are also passages in the *Fourth Meditation* where Descartes appears to be committed to the claim that the intellect does not *always* determine the will to act. For example,

> For it is surely no imperfection in God that he as given me the freedom to assent or not assent in those cases where he did not endow my intellect with clear and distinct perception; but it is undoubtedly an imperfection in me to misuse that freedom and make judgments about matters which I do not fully understand.[16]

The subject of the *Fourth Meditation* is, in many ways, an attempt at a free-will defense (or a theodicy) on the part of the Cartesian meditator. The reason for error in finite minds is not God, Descartes argues, but rather that the scope of finite wills extends beyond the scope of finite intellects and that we allow our will to make determinations on the basis of incomplete data or misinformation. It is in the context of this discussion that Descartes seems to suggest that we have the power over our will to withhold belief about those intellectual states that we do not clearly understand (indeed that is the exercise in the first few *Meditations*). He says, "But if in such cases [where perception is neither clear nor distinct] I either affirm or deny, then I am not using my free-will correctly…"[17] Ragland points to passages such as this in order to deny that Descartes was committed to the determinism of the will *in every case*. Ragland argues that in certain cases, Descartes maintains that finite

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[16] *Fourth Meditation* (CSM II p. 42). Cf. *Principles* I.37 (CSM I p. 205).

[17] *Fourth Meditation* (CSM II p.41).

beings have the requisite two-way power over actions of the will, and thus cannot be committed to compatibilism, for it is not true in *all* cases that the intellect determines the will.

There is a broad basis of textual evidence that, when taken at face value, suggests that there are times when the human will has the power to withhold assent to a proposition. Indeed, this ability appears to be the starting point for many of Descartes's philosophical enquiries. Perhaps most famously, Descartes's meditator expresses her desire to exercise her will in the *First Meditation*, and what follows from there seems to be an exercise in what can and cannot be doubted. This is not, however, the only place in Cartesian philosophy where one encounters this kind of project. Part I of the *Principles* opens with a discussion that parallels the discussion of the necessity of doubting everything that can be doubted in order to get to the truth. Descartes writes, "The seeker after truth must, once in the course of his life, doubt everything, as far as is possible."[18] From here, Descartes's discussion of the free exercise of the will echoes that found in the *Meditations*, and is even stated more explicitly than he ever does in the primary text of the *Meditations*; in *Principles* I.6 Descartes says, "We have free will, enabling us to withhold our assent in doubtful matters and hence avoid error."[19] Needless to say, some degree of intellectual autonomy appears to be central to the Cartesian method, and inasmuch as this is true, it seems that anyone trying to fit Descartes into some manner of determinism wherein the content of the intellect *always* determines acts of will has some difficult work ahead of them.

Radical Incompatibilism

As an alternative to the moderate incompatibilism of Ragland, there are interpreters who maintain that even in instances of clear and distinct perception, Descartes maintains

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[18] *Principles* I.1 (CSM I p. 193).

[19] (CSM I p. 194). Cf. *Discourse on Method III* (CSM I, p. 125).

that finite creatures have the ability to withhold assent. To support this view, Cecilia Wee relies on Descartes's proclamation in *Principles* I.37 that,

> It is a supreme perfection in man that he acts voluntarily, that is, freely; this makes him in a special way the author of his own actions and deserving praise for what he does…When we embrace the truth, our doing so voluntarily is much more to our credit than would be the case if we could not have done otherwise.[20]

Wee contends if it were the case that during a clear and distinct perception finite minds could not help but assent to the truth of a proposition, that they would no longer be praiseworthy for having had that insight. She argues, Descartes equates voluntary action with freedom, and suggests that it is because of freedom that an agent deserves praise for her actions. Wee also points to a few letters where Descartes qualifies his claims regarding the ability to do otherwise in the context of free clear and distinct perception. In a letter to Mesland[21] Descartes notes that there is a distinction between what we can do "*morally speaking"* and what we can do "*absolutely speaking*." It is in that letter that Descartes notes that, "it is always open to us to hold back from admitting a clearly perceived truth, provided that we consider it a good thing to demonstrate the freedom of our will by doing so." Wee also relies on a passage from another letter to Mesland[22] where Descartes points to the finitude of the soul as a detriment to the mind's ability to maintain any one thought for an extended period. Descartes suggests that even in clear and distinct perceptions there is a temporal gap between the recognition of the idea as clear and distinct, and the act of the will, and as such

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[20] (CSM I. p. 18-19) and (Wee, Descartes and Leibniz on Human Free-Will and the Ability to Do Otherwise 2006), p. 389.

[21] (CSMK, p. 245).

[22] May 1644, Descartes says, "if we see very clearly that a thing is good for us, it is very difficult – and on my view, impossible, *as long as one continues in the same thought* – to stop the course of our desire [to pursue it]. But the nature of the soul is such that it hardly attends for more than a moment to a single thing; hence as soon as our attention turns from the reasons which show us that the thing is good for us we can call up some other reason to make us doubt it, *and so suspend our judgment and even form a contrary judgment*" (CSMK p. 233-4), emphasis mine.

it is at least *prima facie* possible that one could become distracted prior to affirming the truth of a clear and distinct proposition. This is the strategy that Wee employs with regard to finite beings' ability to do otherwise in the face of clear and distinct perceptions.

Since the intellect and the will are distinct faculties in finite beings, Wee argues, it is at least in principle possible that the intellect could present an idea that is clear and distinct, and before the will has time to affirm it, one could be distracted or somehow distract herself. By becoming distracted or by distracting herself, the finite being is able to withhold her assent to the veracity of the idea, thereby exercising her free will. Since the will and the intellect are *necessarily* separate (even if unified) faculties in finite creatures, it is always at least logically possible to withhold assent to a proposition. This, Wee argues, means that Descartes has room for a "robust" sense of freedom.

> In short, Descartes holds that it is always possible – even in the case of clear and distinct perceptions – for a human to do otherwise, at least in the sense that she is never necessitated to will as she did. He can thus accept as a *sine qua non* of human freedom that the agent should always be 'able to do otherwise.'[23]

Radical incompatibilism does preserve, in a strong sense, the existence of alternate possibilities. Such a view, however, is not without problems, both textual and philosophical. Philosophically speaking, the ability to do otherwise is important, but it is not immediately clear on Wee's understanding of Cartesian freedom that finite minds are really in able to do otherwise in any relevant sense. That is, while it is possible to withhold assent to a clear and distinct perception, absolutely speaking, the only way it seems that such a possibility can be exploited is either by becoming distracted, or by turning one's attention away from the perception. Becoming distracted, however, is not obviously within the control of the agent. If distractions are successful in preserving the existence of alternate possibilities, then it does not do much to help establish freedom in any important sense, as this seems to make

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[23] (Wee, Descartes and Leibniz on Human Free-Will and the Ability to Do Otherwise 2006), p. 397.

alternate possibilities only a result of an accident rather than an exercise of freedom. Since what "allows" the finite mind to withhold assent is something causing a distraction, it is unclear that failing to become distracted and continuing in the same thought was possible in the first place! That there seems to be logical space in the Cartesian system for a finite mind to withhold assent is, I think, insufficient to motivate any kind of metaphysical principle. That is, it is unclear that a finite being can clearly and distinctly perceive that she has the ability to ignore her clear and distinct perceptions. For that claim, there is simply no textual evidence that I am aware of.

The ability to withhold assent to any perception is important to the Cartesian methodology. With regard to the ability to turn one's attention away from the clear and distinct perception, Wee is aware that Descartes does not consider this an easy task, if it is at all possible: "Insofar as this change follows from a turn of attention, it is presumably an act of will. But crucially, Descartes seems to have thought that there is only a small window of opportunity for the exercise of this act."[24] This is not compelling, however, as Wee is trying to establish that the will is free to act by relying on the freedom of the will. That is, Wee argues that what grounds the ability to will other than one does in the case of clear and distinct perception is that the will can turn the attention of the intellect away from such a perception in order to avoid affirming the clear and distinct perception. "It is in principle always possible to for the agent to shift attention to some other thought *before* the will affirms or pursues that truth/good. The agent can therefore do other than affirm or pursue, even while she is having a clear and distinct perception…"[25]

The radical incompatibilist view does face textual difficulties. In *Principles* I.40, just after Descartes expressed that finite beings experience freedom clearly, he says that, "It is

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[24] (Wee, The Fourth Meditation: Descartes and Libertarian Freedom 2014), p. 192.

[25] Ibid.

also certain that everything was preordained by God."[26] This is not the only passage where Descartes states that God preordains every event, and that the acts of the will are just the kind of events that depend for their existence on God's will. In a letter to Elizabeth Descartes says, "the slightest thought could not enter a person's mind without God's having willed from eternity that it should so enter."[27] While Wee has made a case for the thesis that Descartes is not committed to the necessitation of the will by the intellect, there is textual evidence that suggests that God necessitates every act of the will (as well as everything else).

In order to handle the passages that imply theological determinism, Wee stresses the portions of the *Principles* passages where Descartes points to the immeasurable power God possesses. In *Principles* I.40-41, Descartes says that as finite minds, one can clearly and distinctly perceive *that* God has infinite power, but we cannot "get a sufficient grasp of it to see how it leaves the actions of men free undetermined."[28] Since finite minds cannot fully grasp the power of God, but nevertheless have "such close awareness of freedom and indifference which is in us that there is nothing we can grasp more evidently or more perfectly,"[29] Wee suggests that there is good reason to think that the inconceivability of God gives Descartes a way out of contradiction. She suggests that for Descartes, there are two perspectives finite minds can adopt with respect to human freedom. On one hand, one can consider herself only as a finite being (independent of the broader metaphysical system) and, "when we simply consider our own experiences, we know that at the point of choice, we always had the freedom and the robust ability to do otherwise."[30] On the other hand,

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[26] (CSM I, p. 206).

[27] Descartes to Elisabeth 6 October, 1645 (CSMK p. 272).

[28] *Principles* I.41 (CSM I, p. 206).

[29] Ibid.

[30] (Wee, Descartes and Leibniz on Human Free-Will and the Ability to Do Otherwise 2006), p. 406-7.

however, one can consider herself as part of a larger universe and metaphysical system. In this case, "Descartes accepts that… we are unable to grasp how human freedom and the ability to do otherwise is possible."[31] By stressing the finitude of created minds, and the infinitude of God's power, Wee is able to position herself in a good spot with regard to the *seeming* contradiction. When one clearly and distinctly perceives her freedom, she can "never go wrong,"[32] but in cases concerning God's attributes, finite minds cannot fully grasp the content of such an idea—thus the seeming contradiction is merely the shortcoming of a finite mind. Since we cannot appropriately grasp God's power, Wee argues, we should be content with the knowledge that our experience of freedom is accurate, since it is clearly and distinctly grasped.[33]

Wee is probably the closest to being correct. She is right to stress the Descartes's commitment to the inability of finite minds to grasp God's power, and that when confronted with the seeming incompatibility of God's eternally willing (or constantly creating) every state of affairs, one should not try to reconcile both claims *at the same time*.[34] Descartes is explicit in the *Principles* that one will get herself into problems when she tries to grasp both her freedom and the preordination of all things by God. Thus one should not try to make sense of how they fit together. There is no question that Descartes is committed to the view that God is omnipotent, and he unequivocally states that everything depends on God for its existence. Wee is right to stress that God is beyond comprehension, and that finite beings, in virtue of having a clear and distinct perception of their own freedom must recognize that

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[31] (Wee, Descartes and Leibniz on Human Free-Will and the Ability to Do Otherwise 2006), p. 406.

[32] *Principles* I.43 (CSM I, p. 207).

[33] (Wee, Descartes and Leibniz on Human Free-Will and the Ability to Do Otherwise 2006), p. 412.

[34] This echoes, in important ways (that I return to below), the way that I handle Descartes's answer to Elisabeth on the issue of the mind-body union and separability in Chapter Four.

they are free in some robust sense. Yet, since it is also clearly true that all things depend on God, and since the compatibility of these clear and distinct perceptions is inconceivable, finite beings should not try to make sense of both at the same time. What my view offers is an account of how it is that these claims are not straightforwardly incoherent, and it does not make proclamations regarding the existence of possibilities that are not, themselves, clearly and distinctly perceived. Without some account of the nature of modality, these commitments raise a serious difficulty for both forms of incompatibilism—viz. even if finite beings recognize that there are two perspectives one can take on the order of the world, how is this not merely an *ad hoc* fix? That is, maybe Descartes was just confused and committed to a contradiction but noticed only too late. My view is a unique position to resolve that worry on Wee's behalf.

Compatibilism

If it turns out that Descartes is committed to theological determinism, then it must be the case that he is a compatibilist of a kind. What can be said of Descartes's commitment to theological determinism? With regard to this question, there are few passages more telling than *Principles* I.40 where Descartes says, "It is also certain that *everything* was preordained by God."[35] As I mentioned above, the same sentiment is put forth with greater zeal in a letter to Elizabeth, where Descartes says, "that the slightest thought could not enter into a person's mind without God's willing, and having willed from all eternity, that it should so enter."[36] Despite the force with which Descartes puts forth these declarations, they are found near passages that, at face value, support a radical incompatibilist view of human free will. In *Principles* I.39 Descartes claims that the freedom of the will is self-evident: "That

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[35] (CSM I p. 206) emphasis mine. See also, Descartes to Elisabeth 6 October, 1645 (CSMK, p. 267).

[36] (CSMK, p. 272).

there is freedom in our will, and that we have power in many cases to give or withhold our assent at will, is so evident that it must be counted among the first and most common notions that are innate in us."[37] In another letter to Elizabeth, Descartes claims that, "we cannot help regarding ourselves as independent…" and that such independence makes our actions praise or blameworthy.[38] Of course, if Descartes is a compatibilist, then the fact that he discusses human freedom should not be a surprise at all; after all, the compatibilist view is that freedom is compatible with determinism.

Chappell defends the compatibilist reading of Descartes by stressing the dependency of all created substance on God's creative act and argues that, "God is causally responsible for every mind with its power of willing by having created it; and he is responsible for every volition by concurring in all actions of minds."[39] Chappell suggests that Descartes's commitment to compatibilism is not merely a consequence of Cartesian ontology and divine omnipotence. Rather Descartes stated his commitment to the view explicitly in at least one passage other than the *Principles* passage cited above. Pointing to a letter to Elizabeth, Chappell notes that Descartes explicitly *says* "free will… is not incompatible with a dependence of quite another kind, whereby all things are subject to God."[40] This claim, however, is not as much of a smoking gun at it might seem on first gloss. It is quite plausible to read theological determinism into this passage, especially when considering Descartes's creation doctrine, but there is another quite plausible way to read this passage. If one were to approach the *dependency* of the will on God in the same way that Descartes understands his ontology, then the move from dependence to determinism is not immediately obvious. That

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[37] (CSM I p. 205-6).

[38] Descartes to Elisabeth, 3, November 1645 (CSMK p. 277).

[39] (Chappell 1994), p. 184. In particular, Chappell appeals to Descartes's letter to Elisabeth of 6 October, 1645 (CSMK, p. 272 (quoted above)).

[40] Descartes to Elisabeth, 3 November, 1645 (CSMK, p. 277).

is, the dependency relation about which Descartes is speaking could be one of two separate dependency relations from within the Cartesian metaphysical system: either volitions depend on God as a direct cause, or volitions depend on God in the way that modes depend on substances (without substance modes cannot exist), and substance cannot exist without God, but substance itself need not be an efficient cause of the mode. On the latter interpretation—where volitions depend on God, they would have to be modes of God because the kind of dependency described there concerns the dependency a mode has to a substance. And if volitions depend on God in this way, then finite volitions would have to be modes of God. But Descartes is not Spinoza, and finite beings possess volitions. This consideration seems to push us in the direction of the former interpretation. Yet, all modes are dependent beings, and have to have been created by God. Either way one tries to make sense of this dependence relation, the smoking gun must be the discussion of divine preordination.

Sleigh, Chappell, and Della Rocca together argue that regardless of how we read the Elizabeth passages, Descartes explicitly commits himself to causal determinism.[41] There are two different senses in which the passage might be read, they argue, and on each reading the will is caused in a way that commits Descartes to determinism, and thus compatibilism. The first way to read the passage is to take it at face value, that God is the immediate cause of every volition, and yet finite minds are still free. In the November letter to Elizabeth, Descartes explicitly states "the independence we experience and feel in ourselves… is not incompatible with a dependence of quite another kind, whereby all things are subject to God."[42] On the other reading of the Elizabeth passage, where volitions are caused by the mind (mind being a mode of substance that depends on God for its existence), Sleigh, et al rely on Descartes's commitment to the freedom of spontaneity,

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[41] (Sleigh Jr, Chappell and Della Rocca 1998).

[42] (CSMK, p. 277).

> Since, volitions, however, are not merely properties but actions, and therefore events, there is more to their dependence than [merely belonging to substance]. They owe not only their being but their occurrence at a particular time to the minds they belong to: minds produce or perform their volitions as agents, besides possessing them as substances. Furthermore, each volition is produced solely by its own mind (leaving God out of the account): this is what makes it a spontaneous and hence a free action. This means not only that no other (created) agent takes part in performing it, but that no (created) factor outside its own mind affects it.[43]

It is precisely *because* the volition is caused in the appropriate way that the act is free. The causes are all self-contained (apart from God), making the agent in a restricted sense, autonomous. The volitions are all caused from within. This, Sleigh et al note, is also consistent with the passages where Descartes asserts that we are most free when we are compelled by a clear and distinct perception.[44] While we have seen conclusive reason to believe that Descartes is not committed to the view that the intellect *always* determines the will to act, there does seem to be excellent reason to think that in light of considerations regarding God's power and/or creative acts, that Descartes is committed to some kind of determinism. Further ontological considerations, Sleigh et al suggest, implies that freedom is in part constituted by the causal relationship that minds bear to substance. If they are correct about this, then even though in the strict sense substances depend for their being on God's creative act,[45] the modes of substance stand in a causal dependence relation to that substance, and since there is no outside cause, it seems that this causal relation constitutes freedom. This amounts to a strong case for compatibilism.

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[43] (Sleigh Jr, Chappell and Della Rocca 1998), pp. 1211-12.

[44] See *Fourth Meditation*, "[T]he will, or freedom of choice… simply consists in our ability to do or not do something (that is, affirm or deny, to pursue or avoid); or rather, it consists simply in the fact that when the intellect puts something forward for affirmation or denial or for pursuit or avoidance, our inclinations are such that *we do not feel we are determined by any external force*." (CSM II, p. 40, emphasis added). Cf. *Sixth Replies* (CSM II, p. 292); Descartes to Mesland (CSMK 234).

[45] See *Principles* I.51 (CSM I, p 210).

What Should We Do When Presented with Conflicting Evidence?

It is tempting, when confronted with seemingly contradictory textual evidence to try to massage away one or more of these passages, or even to conclude that Descartes was wrestling with some very difficult issues and struggled himself to reconcile two views that are inconsistent, and as such did not have a well-worked out theory of freedom, as seems to be Tierno's position, and might well have been Leibniz's position at one time.[46] As has been my suggestion throughout this project, such moves are, at this point in the interpretive game, unsatisfactory. Descartes was a systematic thinker. We ought to consider his systematic commitments when trying to reconcile seemingly contradictory passages. Only if it turns out that every interpretation of Cartesian freedom results in irreparable damage to some other central tenet of his philosophical or scientific system, should we fall back on Tierno's position.

Many commentators I mentioned at the outset of this paper only appeal to textual evidence where Descartes explicitly discusses freedom of the will to support their various interpretations. As I have shown, there is a wealth of such material that can be taken to support each view. What is clear is that Descartes wants to guarantee human freedom in some sense; he claims in the *Third Replies* that the light of nature guarantees the freedom of finite wills.[47] Freedom of the will seems to be central to his epistemological method in at least three of his major philosophical works. On the other hand, there is also a wealth of textual and systematic evidence to support theological determinism. The textual evidence alone is insufficient to determine Descartes's received view on the freedom of finite wills.

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[46] See Leibniz's "Critical Remarks on the General Part of Descartes's Principles" (1692), there Leibniz comments that Descartes recognizes that his view entails a contradiction and that Descartes's response amounts to "…cutting the knot without solving it," Comments on *Principles* I. 40-41 in (Leibniz, Critical Remarks on the General Part of Descartes's Principles 1965).

[47] (CSM II, p. 134).

Was the textual evidence conclusive, there would not be so many seemingly plausible interpretations. In order to determine whether or not Descartes had in mind an incompatibilist account of free will, we will need to look past the passages where he discusses the will. Any attempt to draw conclusions about Descartes's received view regarding one isolated issue is to ignore a key feature of the work of early modern thinkers: the systematicity of their thought.

When dealing with a philosophical plenum, where should one begin? That is, given the dense interconnections between issues in Cartesian thought, where should we look, if not to the passages that deal specifically with the issue at hand? In this case, we ought to start with God and move to creation, and then to created things. Since all things depend for their existence on God's will, making sense of Descartes's commitment to determinism (of any kind) without appeal to Descartes's account of modality seems a disastrous proposition because Descartes's doctrine of the creation of the eternal truths concerns precisely the nature of possibility. In particular, we must address whether there is room in Descartes's ontology for unactualized possibility, and by doing so one can determine to what extent Descartes is (or even *could* be) committed to the existence of alternate possibilities.

Broader Context: Freedom and Modality

So far, we have seen that there is an apparent tension in Descartes's account of freedom for created (finite) beings. In some passages it sound as if Descartes favors an incompatibilist account of human freedom—that the will of finite beings is free in a robust sense, and that this freedom is guaranteed by the light of nature. That our will extends beyond the scope of the intellect seems, in the *Fourth Meditation,* to account for why it is that finite beings might err in their judgment, and why those errors cannot be blamed on God.[48]

[48] See *Fourth Meditation* (CSM II, p. 39, p. 40, p. 42). For other passages often interpreted as defending a radical libertarian reading see: *First Meditation* (CSM II, p. 15); *Principles* I.6 (CSM I, p. 194); *Principles* I.37 (CSM I, p. 205); Letter to Mesland 9 February, 1645 (CSMK p. 245); *Passions* II.146 (CSM I, p. 380).

I discussed two different versions of incompatibilism, each of which handled passages concerning the determination of the will by clear and distinct perceptions differently.[49] Furthermore, we saw passages where Descartes seems to be unequivocally endorsing theological determinism.[50] These radically diverging passages have given rise to a number of interpretive strategies all of which fall under basically three camps: the radical incompatibilism of Wee, the moderate incompatibilism of Ragland, and the compatibilism of Chappell and Sleigh et al. Each of these interpretive camps massages the passages that seem problematic for his or her preferred view in various ways, but none explicitly consider whether or not there is space in Descartes's ontology for unactualized possibility.

The debate so far has revolved around a question regarding the extent to which Descartes was committed to some kind of determinism. In order to answer that question, we must first ask a distinct question: to what extent Descartes may have been committed to the existence of alternate possibilities? This question is crucial insofar as an incompatibilist reading of Cartesian freedom presupposes that there are genuine alternate possibilities, or options, open to the Cartesian will. If it turns out that in Descartes's metaphysics, the will is never presented with viable alternatives from which to choose, then the incompatibilist reading will fail. Before one can determine if Descartes was committed to the existence of alternate possibilities, she must first determine what Descartes means by "possibility." Descartes's theory of modality is, as we have seen, a matter of some scholarly debate. In this section I will review the main interpretive strategies laid out in Chapter One regarding Descartes's theory of modality and explore the ways that these strategies influence one's reading on Cartesian Freedom.

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[49] See *Fourth Meditation* (CSM II p. 40, p. 42). Cf. *Third Replies* (CSM II p. 135); *Sixth Replies* (CSM II p. 292); Letter to Mesland 9 February, 1645 (CSMK p. 245-246).

[50] See *Principles* I.40 (CSM I p. 206); Letter to Elisabeth 6 October, 1645 (CSMK p. 272, p. 273); Letter to Elisabeth 3 November, 1645 (CSMK p. 277); *Passions* II.145-146 (CSM I p. 380-81).

As was noted in Chapter One, Descartes never offers a full account of the grounds of modality; we have, instead, only fragments of his view from the *Replies to Objections to the Meditations*, a few passages in the *Principles*, his letters and the *Conversation with Burman*. These passages concern the creation of the world and, in a now infamous letter to Mersenne,[51] Descartes explicitly states that God *freely* created "the eternal truths." These truths consist, primarily in logical truths, mathematical truths, and conceptual truths. That God freely created them seems to imply that what we take to be *necessary truths* are in some sense contingent. Paradoxically, Descartes claims that these truths remain necessary. In attempting to make sense of this apparent tension, four general interpretive approaches have been developed, each dependent on a unique interpretation of "possibility." Thus, the debate over Descartes's notion of the freedom of the will must be informed by one's stance on his creation doctrine. Descartes's commitment to the existence of alternate possibilities and his stance regarding free will surely depend on what he meant by "possible."

My own view, 'theological mysterianism,' is the view that that what can be said regarding *absolute* modality on Descartes's view is limited to instances of clear and distinct perceptions of modal facts; this implies that what can be said about freedom is limited to those rare cases where the finite mind attends, unimpeded by preconceived notions, to its own freedom. Like Wee, I rely on the myriad passages where Descartes stresses the incomprehensibility of God's infinite power. In the preface to the *Meditations*, for example, Descartes says that many of the objections offered by atheists are predicated upon misunderstandings regarding God's nature.

> I will only make the general point that all of the objections commonly tossed around by atheists to attack the existence of God invariably depend either on attributing human feelings to God or on arrogantly supposing our own minds to be so powerful and wise that we can attempt to grasp and set limits to what God can or should perform. So provided that we remember that our minds must be

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[51] Descartes to Mersenne, 15 April, 1630 (CSMK p. 22-23)

> regarded as finite, while God is infinite and beyond our comprehension, such objections will not cause us any difficulty.[52]

This is not the only passage where Descartes expresses how the finitude of created minds precludes a proper understanding of what God might be able to do, in the *Appendix to the Fifth Objections and Replies*, Descartes says of God, "[s]ince the word 'grasp' implies some limitation, a finite mind cannot grasp God, who is infinite. But that does not prevent him having a perception of God, just as one can touch a mountain without being able to put one's arms around it."[53] There is no question the extent to which Descartes is committed to the fact that finite minds possess an idea of the infinite, but what is striking about these passages is just how difficult it seems to be for finite minds to get a *complete* idea of the infinite. In the above passages, Descartes stresses the limitations that a finite mind has and how that is an impediment to the proper and total understanding of God's nature. Indeed this theme occurs over and over again in Descartes's writing. In the *Second Replies* Descartes says,

> [O]ur understanding tells us that there is in God an absolute immensity, simplicity and unity which embraces all other attributes and has no copy in us, but is, as I have said before, 'like the mark of the craftsman stamped on his work'. In virtue of this we recognize that, of all the individual attributes which, by a defect of our intellect, we assign to God in a piecemeal fashion, corresponding to the way in which we perceive them in ourselves, none belong to God and to ourselves in the same sense. Moreover, there are many indefinite particulars of which we have an idea, such as indefinite (or infinite) knowledge and power, as well as number and length and so on, that are also infinite.[54]

While there is little problem recognizing *that* God is infinite and *that* God has a number of attributes that in some way resemble attributes we possess, we also perceive that the ways in

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[52] (CSM II p. 8).

[53] (CSM II p. 274). Cf. *Fifth Replies*, "if I can grasp something, it would be a total contradiction for that which I grasp to be infinite. For the idea of the infinite, if it is a true idea, cannot be grasped at all, since the impossibility of being grasped is contained in the formal definition of the infinite" (CSM II p. 253); and *First Replies* (CSM II, p. 81).

[54] (CSM II p. 98-99).

which we understand God's attributes are not completely accurate. In *Principles* I.40, Descartes implies that it is impossible, or at least very difficult, to clearly hold before your mind *both* a clear and distinct idea of God and a clear and distinct idea of the freedom a finite being possesses. In the next passage, he continues in this vein saying of the apparent incompatibility of God's power and our freedom, "it would be absurd, simply because do not grasp one thing [God's omnipotence], which we know must by its nature be beyond our comprehension, to doubt something else of which finite minds have an intimate grasp…"[55] All of these passages point to the view that while finite beings might be able to know something about God's power, it is beyond anything that they can actually wrap their minds around, so to speak.[56] In Chapter Three I gave an account of how it is possible that finite beings can *know*, unproblematically, that which they cannot grasp. The mechanism by which finite minds 'touch' the 'mountainous' power God possesses is a direct apprehension of the *fact* that God possesses that power. What the finite mind cannot grasp is the truth-maker; it that is no different in kind from clearly and distinctly grasped concepts.

Descartes does not shy away from the implications of his view of omnipotence. In a letter to Mesland, Descartes explicitly states that to answer whether God always does what God knows to be most perfect is beyond what a finite mind can judge.[57] Another passage where Descartes keeps quiet about what can be said regarding the scope of divine power appears in a 1648 letter to Arnauld. Descartes claims that he does "not think we should every say of anything that it cannot be brought about by God. For since every basis of truth and goodness depends on his omnipotence, I would not dare say that God cannot make a

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[55] *Principles* I.41 (CSM I p. 206).

[56] See also, *Third Replies* (CSM II, p. 133).

[57] Descartes to Mesland, 2 May, 1644 (CSMK p. 232).

mountain without a valley or bring it about that 1 and 2 are not 3."[58] By placing priority on the immense power God possesses, Descartes recognizes that there is very little about God that can actually be grasped by finite beings, especially with regard to God's power or the implications thereof. Since God is the author of all reality, finite beings get themselves into trouble by attempting to make claims about what they cannot clearly and distinctly grasp. In the case of what is possible for God, when a finite being tries to make sense of what an infinitely powerful being is capable of, she is "arrogantly" projecting onto a being, which is beyond the scope of her understanding, her own finite point of view. Such a projection, Descartes says, is to move beyond what can be clearly understood, and thus results in confused ideas and atheistic objections that do not apply.

Since finite beings cannot grasp God's power, finite minds are not in a position to grasp the implication of such power, thus they are not able to understand what God can or cannot do. Descartes is explicit that finite beings should not discuss what is possible for God, but rather should stick to what is clear and distinct for them. What is clear is that what can appropriately be said is that finite beings are created with "such a mind that [they] cannot conceive a mountain without a valley, or a sum of 1 and 2 which is not 3; such things involve a contradiction in [finite] conception."[59] What I suggest is that regarding modality, Descartes understood possibility and necessity as actually existing independent of, and corresponding to relations between concepts that are immutable and present to finite minds. Insofar as the ideas are *true,* they must correspond to something actually existing in the world, even if what it is to which they correspond is not something that finite minds can grasp. This amounts to an epistemological analysis of modal *concepts*; the modality of which

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[58] Descartes to Arnauld, 29 July, 1648 (CSMK p. 358-9). Cf. *Sixth Replies*: "It is because [God] willed to create the world in time that it is better than if he had created it from eternity; and it is because he willed that the three angles of a triangle should necessarily equal two right angles that this is true and cannot be otherwise; and so on in other cases" (CSM II p. 291).

[59] Ibid.

finite minds can speak, for Descartes, is nothing over and above the relations between the concepts that populate finite minds. They can know, however, that there is something to which the concepts correspond. I discussed the necessity of certain truths in Chapter Four as being noticed by containment relations, or simply immutable certainty. Again, the immutability of the truth does not *make* the truth necessary, but it does contribute to the finite mind's apprehension of it *as necessary*. Logical inconsistency is another relation in which concepts may stand. This mental apprehension allows one to recognize that something grounds the truth of clear and distinct modal claims.

With this analysis of Cartesian modality, we are in a better position to make sense of Cartesian freedom. When finite beings look inward and examine their concept of the will, contained in that very concept is freedom. Since the will is, in Descartes's sense, *necessarily* free, finite beings can speak correctly about their 'free' actions, and they are now in a position to say that it matches the way the world is constituted. Returning to the passages in the *Principles* (37-41) one will notice that when Descartes speaks of freedom, he always couches the discussion in terms of the subjective experience of freedom,[60] and when he discusses God's power, he reiterates that God is incomprehensibly powerful, and that finite beings should not attempt to reconcile the seeming difficulty that stems from God's preordaining everything with this divinely guaranteed freedom. The reason finite beings should not try to reconcile these is because the contradiction is only apparent—that is, since finite minds cannot fully grasp God's power, they cannot properly say whether such power is incompatible with finite freedom. On the face of it, reconciling God's eternality and the dependence of all things on God's creative act with any robust sense of freedom is difficult. Ironing out the details of how that works and whether it is compatibilist or incompatibilist is

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[60] At the end of the *First Meditation* the still quite confused, not yet Cartesian meditator, describes her experience of freedom (CSM II, p. 15). Cf. *Principles* I.39 (CSM I. p. 206) and (Cunning, The First Meditation: Divine Omnipotence, Necessary Truths, and the Possibility of Radical Deception 2014), p. 83-84.

beyond what finite minds are capable of achieving. On this topic, my view is that it is best to pass over in silence.

In what follows, I will provide a short review of the views in Descartes's theory of modality and contrast them with my own. I will suggest tie them to the free-will discussion, and suggest ways in which theological mysterianism is better equipped to handle this issue as well. The two possibilisms, 'universal possibilism' and 'limited possibilism' can be understood to support the incompatibilist interpretations, but are ultimately unsatisfactory, as we have seen in Chapter Two. The 'actualist/necessitarian' views entail a compatibilist reading of Descartes on freedom but face concerns of their own. I will also address the reductivist account and further illustrate the ways in which my own view differs from it.

Universal Possibilism

Recall that for the universal possibilist necessity is itself an artifact of finite cognition; that literally everything is possible for God, including squaring a circle and making a contradiction true. If this is the correct interpretation of Descartes's view on modality, then Descartes faces no problem when he says in *Principles* I.41 it is possible that God can both determine everything *and* make us free (in a strong libertarian sense). God can make it true that all actions are fully determined, that freedom is incompatible with determinism, and that finite beings are radically free. A defender of the radical incompatibilist view of human freedom will find in Frankfurt's view a convenient way to accommodate seemingly troubling passages. Universal possibilism has the virtue of allowing the defender of libertarianism the ability to massage away the tension in Descartes's view. If, however, this is the reason for adopting universal possibilism then, as we have seen, further problems await. This interpretation has been called "extravagant"[61] and "incoherent,"[62] and for good reason.

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[61] (Alanen, Omnipotence, Modality and Conceivability 2010)

[62] (Geach 1973), p. 10

After all, the view does entail that the impossible is always possible. Although I explained in detail my objections to this view in chapters One and Two, I will briefly review them here.

The proponent of universal possibilism correctly stresses the absolute power of God, and plays up the inconceivability of such power. Still, this view entails a radical re-interpretation of the *Meditations*. To that end, Frankfurt suggests that the text should be read as exploring the cognitive limitations of finite beings rather than as a textbook instructing others in how to find the route to absolute truth. Following Frankfurt here, we saw two separate concnerns: (a) in the *Third* and *Fifth Meditations* Descartes offers a causal argument and an ontological argument for God's existence, but if *necessity* is a purely human cognitive artifact, then it is unclear how one can understand these arguments, and (b) universal possibilism entails that, in some way, God *is* in fact, a deceiver. That is, if one finds that some proposition *p* is *necessarily false* (e.g. contradictions), then she wrongly believes *p* is impossible. Absolutely speaking, however, *p* is possible, as is everything. Thus the *First Meditation* evil genius hypothesis has come true; the worry was, "since I sometimes believe that others go astray in cases where they think they have the most perfect knowledge, may I not similarly go wrong every time I add two and three or count the sides of a square…?"[63] If Frankfurt's position is correct, then the answer to this question is an emphatic, "yes!"

Perhaps worse yet, the view is self-defeating. We saw that while Frankfurt suggests that the truths finite minds take to be necessary, "need not be truths at all,"[64] there is one truth the veracity of which we cannot cast into doubt—that God is omnipotent.[65] The unconditional truth of this proposition is the motivation for accepting universal possibilism, and so it seems that God's omnipotence would have to be, in some absolute sense,

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[63] *First Meditation* (CSM II, p. 14).

[64] (Frankfurt, Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths 1977), p. 45.

[65] See (Cunning, Argument and Persuasion in Descartes's Meditations 2010), p. 197.

necessary. Of course, given the interpretation that Frankfurt offers, there is no way for any Cartesian to know such a thing because all necessity reduces to finite psychology. Frankfurt gets himself into trouble right off the bat. He seems to take seriously the incomprehensible power of God, but then asserts that finite beings can comprehend it. Suggesting that finite beings can assert anything about what is possible for a being whose power is beyond their comprehension is, as I argued above, philosophically and textually problematic. My view is sensitive to these matters, and pays homage to Descartes's methodological commitments. Since we cannot grasp God's power, to affirm or deny any proposition regarding it is to fail to use one's free will correctly.[66]

Limited Possibilism

In response to the "extravagance" of universal possibilism I considered Curley's "limited possibilism."[67] Curley's idea is that there are certain truths the modal status of which God cannot change (for example truths about God's own nature) and others that God contingently wills to be *necessary*. As a result, Descartes can maintain the robust necessity of the laws of logic while maintaining that God might have made them other than they are—i.e. the necessary truths are not *necessarily* necessary. On this view, there are limits to what God can do. While this does not immediately determine what *is* possible, it implies that there are actual, possible, and necessary truths. This allows us some flexibility in trying

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[66] See *Fourth Meditation*, "If, however, I simply refrain from making a judgment in cases where I do not perceive the truth with sufficient clarity and distinctness, then it is clear that I am behaving correctly and avoiding error. But if in such cases I either affirm or deny, then I am not using my free will correctly" (CSM II p. 41).

[67] (Curley 1984). For another (more conservative) version of limited possibilism see (Ishiguro, The Status of Necessity and Impossibility in Descartes 1986) and (Ishiguro, A Reply to Jacques Bouveresse 1987). Ishiguro defends a much more traditional account of the contingency and necessity of the eternal truths: she defends the Scholastic interpretation of contradictions as being nothing, and thus God's inability to create them does not count against His omnipotence, for to create nothing at all is not a power. The contingency of the truths comes in that God is not necessitated to will at all. Thus, in some sense, God could have done otherwise.

to make sense of Descartes's view on human freedom. Recall that Curley "exploits an analogy" between the act of willing in God and in finite beings to ground his view. Given divine simplicity, the wills of created beings and God's will are quite different. Nonetheless, Curley argues, there is a commonality between them: if an agent *A* wills that *p*, then it is at least logically possible that *A* will ~*p*. Curley takes this to be a "general truth about acts of will."[68] As Curley sees it, anything in *creation* is either contingent or contingently necessary, while God's nature is necessarily necessary because God does not will Himself into existence.

Curley maintained that the necessity of the eternal truths is grounded by God's immutability.[69] But recall that immutability alone is insufficient to ground necessity. For Descartes, everything that exists depends on God's will, so on this account every fact was willed from all eternity by God's immutable will. But if the immutability of God's will is the ground for necessity, then that would seem to make even contingent truths necessary (but not necessarily necessary). This is what makes the passages in the *Principles* and in the correspondence with Elisabeth so difficult to reconcile with freedom.

I also noted that there is something suspicious about the first step that Curley takes in his account; Curley admits early on that there are a number of dissimilarities between the way that God is constituted and the way that God's creations are constituted, including the doctrine of divine simplicity, a doctrine that neither he nor Frankfurt claim to really understand or allow to play much of a role in their accounts. But despite Curley's insistence that the will of God be radically different from those of His creations Curley goes on to draw a "general truth about acts of will;" a truth which itself involves a modal operator. Curley claims that as a general truth, if some agent, *A* wills p, then it is at least *logically possible*,

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[68] (Curley 1984), p. 580.

[69] (Curley 1984), p. 593.

that *A* will ~p. But it is not clear just what status Curley is able to assign to that use of "logically possible"; since Curley wants to deal in iterated modalities, and there are concerns on the table about what scope 'possibility' can have given the immutability of God's will, it is not at all clear what force the "general truth about acts of will" is supposed to carry. It is here that Curley's view begins to become a mess. There seem to be no way to consistently resolve the various levels of modality in conjunction with the "general truth about wills" without *ad hoc* modifications.

In some ways the above objections all stem from the same root as the objection that I offered to universal possibilism. This view tries to take seriously the immensity of God's power, but ignores an important feature of Cartesian thought about the intentional object of finite beings' idea of God, the inability of the concept to be fully grasped. In much the same way that Frankfurt assumes that finite beings can grasp omnipotence, Curley seems to maintain that the possibilities are the same for finite beings and the infinite being. That limited possibilism makes this claim is the ultimate shortcoming of the view. Indeed the "universal truth" about wills on which Curley relies must itself be a free creation of God. It is not immediately clear that Curley can help himself to such a claim (even setting aside the modal issues); for Descartes, God is the author of all possible reality, so if it is possible (logically or otherwise), on one reading, for God to do otherwise than God does, God must create this possibility. To assert that God does this, of course, is to claim that one has the ability to know what God can and cannot do, which as I have argued throughout this dissertation, Descartes denies often.

Actualism/Necessitarianism

The third school of thought regarding Descartes's theory of modality is a view that has perhaps the most obvious impact on the free-will debate. Nelson and Cunning, and Cunning separately, have recently argued that Descartes's modal metaphysics more closely

resembles Spinoza's than has been previously recognized.[70] Stressing passages in which Descartes says that nothing can exist without God, Nelson and Cunning argue that if there is unactualized reality, then it must exist in some form. There is no room, however, in Descartes's ontology for unactualized possibility, thus Descartes is at least an actualist (all that exists is actual, there is no unactualized possibility), or maybe even a necessitarian.[71] The argument for this surprising conclusion is quite straightforward, but a quick reminder is in order. Since Descartes maintains that God is the author of all reality, and God's will and intellect are identical, then from all eternity, God wills and thus creates a single continuous series of creatures. But, God's will is wholly immutable and so it is impossible for God to will anything other than what He, in fact, wills. Thus, if there is any alternate possibility in Descartes's system, it has to be built in from the moment of creation. Descartes's ontology, however, is simple: there exists only God and God's creations, thus if there really is room for alternate possibility, then it must either be a feature of God, or it must be a feature of God's creatures.

If alternate possibility were a feature of God, then there would have to be some ground for this—Leibniz, for example, has room in his ontology for alternate worlds due to the distinction between the Leibnizian God's will and intellect. Descartes emphatically denies any and all distinctions in God's nature, which entails that there is no way for the intellect to ground unactualized possibility. The will, intellect and creative power of God are all identical, so, for God an act of contemplation just *is* an act of creation. Descartes cannot

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[70] (Nelson and Cunning 1999), (Cunning, Descartes' Modal Metaphysics 2014). See also (Cunning, Argument and Persuasion in Descartes's Meditations 2010).

[71] In (Nelson and Cunning 1999) the claim regarding Cartesian modality is more moderate than Cunning's later (Cunning, Argument and Persuasion in Descartes's Meditations 2010) view. There, Cunning argues that Descartes's modality more closely mirrors Spinoza's. The argument presented above will follow Nelson and Cunning's earlier work.

ground alternate possibility in God; the only option is to ground alternate possibility in creation.

In order for there to be some ground for non-actual possibility in creation, Descartes would have to offer some account of possible, non-actual reality, in terms of either substance or modes. There are passages where Descartes discusses non-existent entities; however, as Nelson and Cunning argue, every discussion that Descartes has of such objects is in terms of finite modes that cannot be clearly and distinctly conceived. Thus, those ideas are materially false, which is to say, not actually beings at all. Every discussion of possibility in Descartes, they argue, is purely conceptual or epistemic. Possibility has to do with the way finite minds cognize and the interconnections between concepts. Epistemic possibility, however, does not amount to any ontologically robust sense of alternate possibility. Since there is no evidence that Descartes has room in his ontology for unactualized possibility, either in God or in God's creation, it seems that Descartes is committed minimally to 'actualism' or perhaps even to necessitarianism. If Descartes is committed to either actualism or necessitarian, then by 'possibility' Descartes must mean that a fact (or state of affairs) is epistemically possible—that is, given what knowledge of the external world finite minds have, that 'possible' fact (or state of affairs) is not ruled out, despite the actual state of affairs being necessitated by God's will. If this is the correct interpretation of Descartes's modal metaphysics, then by 'freedom' Descartes means something compatible with determinism.

One of the concerns that faces the actualist interpretation is Descartes's claim that what sets finite wills apart from the Divine will is the way in which freedom is manifested. For Descartes's God, freedom is a function of radical indifference. The way that Descartes talks about indifference in finite beings is always in terms of the will being presented with insufficiently clear information to determine the will to act; that is, the will is presented with information that under-determines one of three actions that the will might undertake (affirm, deny, refuse to do either). If the will of God is just like the will of humans, then there is *prima facie* reason to think that there are at least two options for God prior to creation, and

God has no inclination one way or the other due to God's supreme indifference. Even if the two choices are: create or don't create it seems that if we understand *absolute* modality, and we take God to be indifferent in any way that relates to finite indifference, then we must accept that some options exist for God. In response to this very worry, Nelson and Cunning argue that this objection illicitly foists a finite understanding onto the divine intellect. They correctly note that assuming that 'God can do anything' is tantamount to claiming to understand what God can or cannot do, and such a claim violates a number of passages in Descartes's writings. Indeed, "Such matters are beyond the scope of finite intellects."[72] This plainly is the right response, both textually and systematically to give on behalf of Descartes.

Nelson and Cunning heed Descartes's warning in the *Preface*, and argue that we ought not try to make sense of what we do not clearly and distinctly perceive. Nelson and Cunning provide the most plausible alternative to mysterianism. They are correct that there does not appear to be any way to account for unactualized possibility in Descartes's ontology. It does not seem out of the question, however, to assert that in order for God to have executed His act of creation, then it must have first been *possible* for God to do so. Of course, if it was possible for God to create the universe, as it must have been given that the world does indeed exist, then how does Descartes account for *that* possibility? Does God have to create the state of affairs such that it is possible for God to create the world? And if so, such an act would be a violation of divine simplicity, and will ultimately lead to an infinite regress consisting of God's creating possibilities in order to create the possibility that God create the world. This is a striking problem, but Nelson and Cunning have at their disposal a ready and powerful answer taken straight from Descartes himself,

> I will only make the general point that all the objections commonly tossed around by atheists to attack the existence of God invariably depend either on attributing human feelings to God or on arrogantly supposing our own minds to be so powerful and wise that

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72 (Nelson and Cunning 1999), p. 146.

> we can attempt to grasp and set limits to what God can or should perform. So, provided only that we remember that our minds must be regarded as finite, while God is infinite and beyond our comprehension, such objections will not cause us any difficulty.[73]

That is, God's methods with regard to creation are beyond our capacity as finite beings, so we should not be expected to understand how it is *possible* that God create the world. Indeed, Nelson and Cunning point to exactly this sentiment when they discuss the eternal truths, "In particular, one must not affirm that 'God can make a mountain without a valley', though, of course, one dare not affirm that God could not make one. Such matters are beyond the scope of finite intellects."[74] This is, I think, the correct response; on the face of it, this response is internally consistent with Nelson and Cunning's actualism and interpretation of modal language in Descartes.

Finite minds are in a position to say quite a bit about the world, but when it comes to God and God's power, they must be more careful about what they can actually say. "We are only entitled to assert that God's power brings about whatever we *clearly and distinctly* perceive. When doing philosophy, whereof we remain confused, thereof we must remain silent."[75] This pithy Wittgensteinian line, however, betrays precisely what is wrong with the inconceivability response to the above objection. While Descartes maintains that finite beings do clearly recognize that God is simple and omnipotent, they cannot appropriately *grasp* what this means for God. To assert one way or another what God can do would be tantamount to projecting onto the divine a finite understanding. Descartes thinks that such a projection is "arrogant." Yet, Nelson and Cunning, in asserting that God creates *only* what is actual, do precisely what they criticize other interpretations of doing—viz. claiming to be able to grasp that which is not clearly understood. If the motivation for adopting actualism

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[73] Descartes, *Preface to the Reader, Meditations* (CSM II, p. 8).

[74] (Nelson and Cunning 1999), p. 146.

[75] (Nelson and Cunning 1999), p. 147.

in Cartesian modality is to pay appropriate attention to what can and cannot be said correctly about absolute modality, then it is inconsistent to assert that finite minds can know that God can only create what is actual, and to maintain that finite minds cannot say that God cannot create a mountain without a valley. For if God can only create what is actual, then since there are no mountains without valleys, finite beings ought to be able to say that God *cannot* do so. A more consistent approach would be to refrain from saying anything at all about what follows from God's power unless either the light of nature or the light of grace reveals the truth. To recognize that God's power is beyond the finite cognitive capacity and, because we recognize this, to see that when we try to posit certain impossibilities as being anything other than the interconnections between finite concepts, we are confused. In philosophy whereof we are confused, thereof we must remain silent. That is to say, the very motivation that Nelson and Cunning have for adopting the actualist interpretation of Descartes's modal metaphysics causes their view to collapse into a quietist position.

Reductivism

The take away message from the reductist is that there is no absolute modality. God's power is beyond what is conceivable for the finite, embodied mind, and modality is nothing over and above the relations between finite concepts. So when it comes to how things are absolutely, we "should not put those thoughts before our minds."[76] The reductivist takes seriously the passages where Descartes asserts that God is beyond our ability to understand. Consider, again what Descartes wrote in the *Preface to the Meditations* (above).

Bennett,[77] has stressed that the manner in which Descartes discusses the eternal truths suggests a conceptualist analysis of modality; that "possibility" and "necessity" refer

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[76] Descartes to Mesland, 2 May 1644 (CSMK p. 233).

[77] (Bennett 1994).

only to the relations between the innate concepts with which finite minds are created. Recall that on Bennett's view, Descartes may be somewhat schizophrenic with regard to the nature of truth. He claims that Descartes maintains a subjectivist/pragmatist account of truth in the *Meditations*, and an objectivist/realist strand elsewhere. This schizophrenia, Bennett suggests, best explains how Descartes thought of iterated modalities; viz. that we cannot divorce ourselves from our mental constitution, and all modality is indexed to that of which we can conceive. He maintains that impossibility is rigidly designated to the constitution of our minds and the relations between concepts that obtain as a result of our conceptual capacities. It is simply a matter of prudence that we take necessary conceptual connections to track the way the world *really* is because there is no way, modally speaking, that the world *really is*. We can't get outside of our conceptual apparatus, so we must simply accept that our concepts impose modality on the world around us.

On its face, reductivism sounds a bit like universal possibilism. The difference is subtle but important. The central thesis of universal possibilism is that God is omnipotent, and can do literally anything, including making contradictions true. The universal possibilist is committed to *that strong* of a positive claim. To put the thesis another way, the universal possibilist maintains that finite minds can grasp absolute modality *as such*—that finite minds can make sense of what modality governs the divine. The reductivist and the actualist share a central thesis, which amounts to a wholesale rejection of the claim that absolute modality is accessible to finite minds. Instead, the reductive quietist and actualist claim, modality is indexed to the nature of the finite mind, and to say what is possible or impossible for God is to project onto God the reasoning of a finite being. With regard to the matter at hand, something like Bennett's view might imply that the reason that Descartes is so cagey about human freedom is that finite minds are simply in no position to say one way or the other what is actually possible in a robust metaphysical sense. Such an approach has a number of virtues—this leaves us in a position to make sense of the troubling passages in the *Principles*, because given created concepts, it does seem clear that finite beings are free. It is equally

clear that God is the author of all things, but to try and clearly maintain both of these claims together is problematic, for obvious reasons. If modality is only a matter of the interconnection between concepts in finite minds, then Descartes's view need not be incoherent; the inconceivability is merely due to a shortcoming due to finite human cognition.

One important point is that Bennett offers a *reductive* analysis of modality. While he is correct that finite minds access primarily their own concepts, to maintain that somehow Descartes intended to offer a reduction of all modality to conceptual relations is too strong a claim. What I suggest instead is that Descartes is fully agnostic regarding the absolute modality that follows from God's infinite power. When finite beings have a clear perception of God, they recognize that the power God possesses is beyond anything that can be fully grasped, and as such, to make any claims about what is impossible for such a being is to inappropriately use one's will to affirm an idea that will, at best, be confused. My account matches Descartes's methodological commitments better than Bennett's does. As I have noted above, in the *Fourth Meditation*, Descartes stresses the importance of utilizing the will only in cases of clear and distinct perception, and when it comes to absolute modality (understood as the modality that governs an omnipotent being), we cannot appropriately grasp the implications of such power. This theological mysterianism further allows me to eliminate the schizophrenic approach to truth in Cartesian metaphysics. Recall that, on my view, the correspondence between mind and world is guaranteed by the nature of truth. That finite minds clearly perceive that certain concepts are essentially contained within others is thus an indication that those things in the world are actually inseparable, but does not imply anything about what follows from God's inconceivable power. For it is still the case that finite minds cannot grasp the implications of God's power—what they can grasp is that seemingly impossible things will not occur. My view eliminates the odd considerations that follow from Bennett's by refusing to foist onto Descartes a particular view about what makes modal claims true.

From Mysterianism in Modality to Mysterianism in Freedom

One's interpretation of Descartes's modal metaphysics determines the extent to which there is logical space for Descartes to be committed to the existence of alternate possibilities. If one accepts one of the possibilisms, robust alternate possibilities are certainly available to Descartes, and thus libertarian freedom is a viable option. I have, however, highlighted some reasons to think that the possibilisms are not viable interpretations. The failure of the possibilisms and the problems plaguing reductivism leave only two plausible interpretations of modality: actualism and theological mysterianism. The remaining views in modality imply that Descartes cannot have held an unqualified incompatibilist account of freedom or that the Cartesian account of freedom does not fit neatly into the standard dialectic. Above, I suggested that actualism collapses into mysterianism. One problem that all of the alternatives of mysterianism share is that they rely on the assumption that finite minds are capable of grasping the implications of God's power—an assumption that Descartes reminds us not to make in the *Preface to the Meditations*. Even if proponents of the possibilisms, reductivism, or actualism could overcome the problems that face their views it is this assumption, common to them all, that causes these interpretations of Cartesian modality to fail.

If Cartesian modality is such that finite beings can know certain modal facts, and can recognize that certain seeming contradictions are only apparent, however, where does this leave us with regard to human freedom? After all, Descartes does say a lot about human freedom, and it is of critical importance to his overall project. The seeming problems regarding the Cartesian will are clear—Descartes unequivocally states that we are most free when we cannot but assent to the truth of a clear and distinct proposition, yet, he also maintains in a number of places that nothing can be more clear from the light of nature than

that finite beings are free.[78] It is important to note, however, that prior to pointing out that finite beings clearly and distinctly perceive *that* they are free, Descartes makes a claim that echoes the *Preface* to the *Meditations*, "[W]e shall get out of these difficulties if we remember that our mind is finite, while the power of God is infinite…"[79] In both passages, Descartes is warning his readers that while finite beings can clearly and distinctly perceive that God is omnipotent, they cannot grasp omnipotence, and thus are not in a position to follow any entailments from the perception. Instead creatures should recognize that God possesses power that is beyond what finite beings can understand and not form beliefs about what is possible or impossible for such a being. This is a striking sentiment for two reasons. First, Descartes is here stressing the incomprehensibility of divine omnipotence; it is precisely this point that is the hang-up for the entire debate regarding Descartes's modal metaphysics. Second, and of more importance for my project is that God's incomprehensibility is the cornerstone of what I take to be the appropriate reading of Descartes's theory of freedom—theological mysterianism. Thus, I suggest, Descartes is neither a libertarian nor a compatibilist about human free will; he is an theological mysterian. He does not deny that finite beings have an awareness of their freedom *and* indifference in some cases, nor does he deny that such a feeling serves as a guarantee that creatures are free. Yet there is also a clear understanding that God preordains *everything* that happens. It is in virtue of the fact that finite beings recognize that the entailments of God's power are beyond them that they ought not put these thoughts before their minds. As a parallel to my discussion of the mind-body problem, Descartes here tells his readers that since finite beings cannot clearly and distinctly hold *both* of these ideas before their minds *at the same time*, they should remain silent concerning how it is that they are consistent. Instead they should simply accept the

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[78] Descartes most explicitly endorses the apparent contradiction in *Principles* I, 41, "How to reconcile the freedom of our will with divine preordination" (CSM I, p. 206).

[79] Ibid.

compatibility as true. As I cited in Chapter Three, Descartes tell us that, "…we will not be at all surprised that there is much, both in the immeasurable nature of God and in the things created by him, which is beyond our mental capacity."[80] This was the case with the seeming tension between the three simple ideas of mind, body and the union between them, and it is the same case in finite freedom. Notice the structural similarity between the passages as written to Elisabeth about the mind-body interaction,

> It does not seem to me that the human mind is capable of forming a very distinct conception of both the distinction between soul and the body and their union; for to do this it is necessary to conceive them as a single thing and at the same time to conceive them as two things; and this is absurd.[81]

And the discussion of the freedom of finite wills and preordination,

> *The freedom of the will is self-evident.*
> That there is freedom in our will, and that we have power in many cases to give or withhold our assent at will is so evident that it must be counted among the first and most common notions that are innate in us. […]
>
> *It is also certain that everything was preordained by God.*
> But now that we have come to know God, we perceive in him a power so immeasurable that we regard it as impious to suppose that we could ever do anything which was not preordained by him. And we can easily get ourselves into great difficulties if we try to reconcile this preordination with the freedom of our will, or **attempt to grasp both at once.**[82]

Here we see that, just as with the case of the simple, true and inconsistent ideas concerning the mind and body, we only get into trouble when we try to do more than the finitude of our cognition allows. Descartes' proposed resolution to this evident problem fits nicely with my account,

> *How to reconcile the freedom of our will with divine preordination*
> But we shall get out of these difficulties if re remember that our mind

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[80] *Principles* I.25 (CSM I, p. 201).

[81] Ibid.

[82] *Principles* I. 39-40 (CSM I, p. 205-6), Emphasis added.

> is finite, while the power of God is infinite – the power by which he not only knew from eternity whatever is or can be, but also willed it and preordained it. We may attain sufficient knowledge of this power to perceive clearly and distinctly that God possesses it; but we cannot get a sufficient grasp of it to see how it leaves free actions of men undetermined. Nonetheless, we have such close awareness of the freedom of indifference which is in us, that there is nothing we can grasp more evidently or perfectly. And it would be absurd, simply because we do not grasp one thing, which we know must by its very nature be beyond our comprehension, to doubt something else of which we have an intimate grasp and which we experience within ourselves.[83]

The solution seems to be best explained by my account of modality—that finite minds have access to certain modal facts, even if the truth-maker thereof is something that they cannot grasp. That there is a tension between true, basic, facts is only problematic because the content of the truth is obscured by the limitations of the finite mind.

Theological mysterianism has the additional virtue of fitting in nicely with the systematicity of Cartesian thought and methodology. At the outset of the *Meditations*, and the *Principles* Descartes (or his meditator) sets out a method that he will use to eliminate the false beliefs that he had previously held, and if it turns out that there are certain beliefs or ideas the veracity of which is insufficiently clear or distinct, then he will simply refrain from judging them to be either true or false. In the instance of freedom, Descartes notices that he clearly and distinctly perceives that God exists and that God's power is beyond his ability to grasp. Descartes also recognizes that God is the cause of all things, in some sense or another. To be sure, it is clear from reflection, Descartes maintains, that the essence of the will is to be free. While these seem inconsistent, Descartes also recognizes that, given the immensity of God, there are certain things that cannot be understood by finite minds, and whereof one cannot clearly and distinctly perceive the truth, thereof one must remain silent.

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83 *Principles* I.41 (CSM I, p. 206).

And Now, for the Elephant in the Room

Throughout this dissertation, and especially in Chapter Three, I have argued for the claim that on Descartes's considered view regarding the scope and authority of clear and distinct perceptions is more limited than has previously been noted. I argued that clear and distinct perceptions provide the finite mind a phenomenological compulsion to assent to the truth of the proposition entertained, but that they fail to provide the thinker with a truth-maker. In this way, I also argued, philosophical intuition, for Descartes is really not all that different from divine revelation. In both cases, the finite mind comes to know *that* something is true, but does not know why, how, or what makes it true. Only in some cases, I argued, can the mind actually get to the truth-maker itself for such truths. And in those cases, the philosophical intuition alone will not get one to it. In the case of the *cogito*, the meditator recognizes that she exists, but it takes five more meditations for her to even begin to understand her own nature—what makes it true that she exists.

While I have argued that the distinction between truth and truth-maker does considerable work within the Cartesian system and can even help make sense of some putative difficulties, a serious objection does present itself. I hinted at this objection in Chapter Three when I noted that this might appear to weaken Cartesian epistemology. If we take seriously the *First Meditation* discussion of hyperbolic doubt, then we might start to worry a little bit more about Descartes's answer to it. Famously, Descartes argues that once we recognize God's goodness through an instance of *cognitio,* we are no longer in a position to even consider the intelligibility of God as a deceiver—we recognize that God cannot be a deceiver; it is inconsistent with God's nature. If finite minds cannot grasp what *makes* it true that God is good, however, does Descartes's answer really get him out of trouble? That is, has my account weakened Cartesian clear and distinct perceptions so much that I have, myself, committed the same sin I have accused Frankfurt, Curley and Bennett of?

This is a serious objection. It seems to me that I have two possible responses. First, I might try to suggest that on Descartes's account, we are able to come to know enough about

the truth-makers for clearly and distinctly intuited ideas by engaging in further cognitive work, whether *a priori* or *a posteriori*. After all, in the case of the self, the meditator was able to work out quite a bit about herself as a mind-body union. As we saw in Chapter Four, Margaret Wilson argued that much of what Descartes devoted his time to was offering physiological and neurological accounts of the passions and the body generally. Still, there are reasons to reject this approach. On the face of it, it seems an *ad hoc* fix. Furthermore, the idea that we might come to know "enough" about the truth-maker to fulfill Descartes's aims is an ambiguous notion. How much knowledge would count as enough? Substantial work would need to be done in order to make such a response in any way plausible, and even then I am skeptical that it could sufficiently address the problem.

I think another response is more plausible. If, as I have argued, the philosophical intuition is something of a weak tool and provides only a list of truths, rather than a robust set of truth-makers about the world, I think we can still recognize entailment relations between truths. I argued that some of the paradigmatic truths Descartes thinks finite beings can recognize through philosophical insight are not obviously the kinds of things that easily conform to created reality. Some of these included the proposition that 'something cannot come from nothing' or that '2+3=5.' I also noted that there is a wealth of literature wherein scholars attempt to make sense of what counts as the truth makers for such claims. Descartes does not provide an account, and as we saw many attempts do violence to his broader system. Yet, if we consider some of these paradigm cases of truths, which must have truth-makers, we can still garner novel and interesting conclusions without any recourse to the truth-makers. Consider the arithmetic truth above. We can move from '2+3=5' and '5≠7' to the conclusion that '2+3≠7.' This is not a particularly exciting conclusion for us at this point in time, but the lesson is important. We need not have any proper system of truth-makers for arithmetical claims worked out to recognize the truth of the conclusion to this brief argument. In just this same way, I suggest, when finite minds come to have a clear and distinct grasp on the nature of goodness, and recognize *that* God *is* good, a finite mind can

recognize that deception is inconsistent with a thing's being good. I argued in previous chapters that the incompatibility of clearly and distinctly grasped innate concepts marks the impossibility of their jointly obtaining. Such is the case with goodness and deception. Deception is, by its very nature a bad thing, and God is good. One need not have a worked out account of the truth-makers to recognize this truth.

Still, one might object that the truth of a belief in God's being good is not really all that powerful of a conclusion. That much strikes me as true. It is correct that, on my view God's non-deceiving nature does not do a lot. Yet, I think that this is Descartes's view. As I argued in Chapter Three, Descartes thinks that God serves an important purpose in grounding and allowing for *scientia*, but I have tried to impress that to a greater extent, Descartes is less concerned with God than he is with natural science and what he calls "moral certainty."[84] Descartes himself implies that this is a particularly valuable kind of certainty—as I noted throughout, Descartes consistently notes that only *once in the course of one's life* should one try to engage in the metaphysical speculations present in the *Meditations*. He reiterates is opposition to sustained philosophical consideration to Elisabeth,

> I believe that it is very necessary to have understood, once in a lifetime, the principles of metaphysics, since they are what gives us the knowledge of God and of our soul. But I think also that it would be very harmful to occupy one's intellect frequently in meditating upon them, since this would impede it from devoting itself to the functions of the imagination and the senses. I think the best thing is to content oneself with keeping in one's memory and one's belief the conclusions which one has once drawn from them, and then employ the rest of one's study time to thoughts in which the intellect co-operates with the imagination and the senses.[85]

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[84] See *Principles* IV.206 (CSM I, p. 290). Moral certainty, according to Descartes, is "having sufficient certainty for application to ordinary life, even though they may be uncertain in relation to the absolute power of God. <Thus those who have never been in Rome have no doubt that it is a town in Italy, even though it could be the case that everyone who has told them this has been deceiving them.>"

[85] Descartes to Elisabeth, 28 June, 1643 (CSMK, p. 228).

It would be "harmful" to spend too much time focusing on God! Harmful! His warning here is in line with the account I have been offering. Instead of focusing on abstruse metaphysical principles, we should think clearly and be careful in what we judge to be true, but recognize that we need to move on from the foundation.

Conclusion

In many ways this chapter has been not only an attempt to illustrate an example of the existence of possible reality within the Cartesian system, despite the difficulty locating it within Cartesian ontology, it has also been an illustration of many of the points I have established in the foregoing chapters. Building on the discussions from Chapter Three regarding the limits of clear and distinct perception, I have shown that not only are clear and distinct perceptions by themselves insufficient to get finite minds to the truth-makers of the very ideas whose veracity they guarantee, but finite minds notice that the there are instances of clear and distinct perceptions which have implications that seem inconsistent with other clearly intuited truths. In such cases, it can be tempting to attribute to Descartes some kind of internal inconsistency. In Chapters One, Four and Five I include illustrations of just such putative inconsistencies.

In Chapter One we noted that Descartes seems to be committed to the claim that God created necessary truths and could have made them different. In Chapter Four we explored the way in which conceiving of the separation of mind and body is inconsistent with their union and interaction. In this chapter we discussed the difficulty one faces when trying to make sense of whether or not Cartesian freedom can even exist given his broader metaphysics. By appealing to intellectual currents present during Descartes's time to which he had access, including the trend of Neo-Platonic mysticism present in 17th Century France, I was able to isolate the real crux of these issues and locate the seemingly disparate problems in one central problem—God's nature and what follows from it. To wit, the problems that are traditionally taken to plague the Cartesian system, the problems that led many of his

interlocutors and interpreters to the conclusion that he was deeply confused about some issues really amount to a single problem that is not unique to Descartes at all. These 'problems' are actually implications of the kind of view Descartes took regarding God's nature and the inconceivable implications that such a nature implies.

Rather than shy away from these implications, however, Descartes embraces them, and provides his readers with a way to ensure that they attend only to what is properly within the scope of finite cognition. In Chapter Three I argued for a quite traditional view regarding what falls within the scope of finite minds, but offered a twist. I argued that clear and distinct perceptions guarantee the veracity of the idea that is properly understood. I also argued that, given Descartes's account of truth (itself clearly and distinctly grasped), that there must be something in reality to which these ideas conform. Still, the philosophical intuition, despite having the power to guarantee *that* there exists a truth-maker for the proposition intuited, does little more. In this way, I argued, it is not a particularly powerful epistemological tool. In many cases, I argued, the truth-maker for clearly intuited propositions is likely some ineffable something that follows from God's inconceivable power. Such is the case with various causal axioms, or the truths of mathematics. In other cases, the truth-maker for certain propositions can be known, but significant work must be done in order to come to know it.

This might come as a shock to most philosophers; Cartesian rationalism is often characterized as the position that virtually everything is known *a priori*. Or as Frankfurt once put it, "Descartes is sometimes thought to have advocated a kind of lunatic *apriorim*, according to which a person might spin all of philosophy and all of science out of his own head without ever needing to turn to perceptual data. This was by no means Descartes's view."[86] There can be little doubt, however, that this picture is oversimplified. I noted in

[86] (Frankfurt, Descartes on the Consistency of Reason 1978), p. 29.

Chapter Three that the most obvious example of a clear and distinctly intuited truth, the truth maker of which *can* be known is the self. I also noted that while the idea the meditator has of the self is a simple intuition, it is not simple in the sense that the content is indivisible. To be sure, even in the *Second Meditation* further work has to be done in order to unpack the notions of the intellect and the will. Picking up on this theme again in Chapter Four, I noted that much of the *Sixth Meditation* is a further exploration of what exactly the self is. When I discussed the union of mind and body, I noted that many of Descartes's projects concerned offering *physiological* explanations of what we often think of a mental events or faculties. Of course, on the Cartesian system, these explanations must begin with, and follow from the clearly and distinctly perceived truths about body (and the substantial union of mind and body), regardless, there is significant *a posteriori* work to be in in order to understand *what* the self is, and that work is not done by the end of the *Meditaitons*.

This kind of limit being placed on what philosophical reflection gets us makes good sense of a series of passages in Descartes's works. Consider the *Preface to the French Edition* to the *Principles*. Descartes writes,

> Thus the whole of philosophy is like a tree. The roots are metaphysics, the trunk is physics, and the branches emerging from the trunk are all the other sciences, which may be reduced to three principal ones, namely medicine, mechanics and morals. By 'morals' I understand the highest and most perfect moral system, which presupposes a complete knowledge of the other sciences and is the ultimate level of wisdom.
>
> Now just as it is not the roots or the trunk of a tree from which one gathers the fruit, but only the ends of the branches, so the principal benefit of philosophy depends on those parts of it which can only be learnt last of all.[87]

In this passage (from 1647), Descartes explains that the real benefit of philosophy is not the fruits of *first philosophy*, though that does play a critical role, but of the final implications of systematic knowledge. Along these lines, in Chapter Four I discussed Descartes's response

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[87] CSM I, p. 186.

to Elisabeth's questions regarding the sense that can be made of the union of mind and body; of particular interest to us here is what might have seemed to be a condescending sidestep of the issue at hand. Descartes says to Elisabeth, who is struggling to make sense of Descartes's responses,

> I am almost afraid that Your Highness may think that I am not now speaking seriously; but that would go against the respect which I owe her and which I will never cease to show her. I can say with truth that the chief rule I have always observed in my studies, which I think has been most useful to me in acquiring what knowledge I have, has been never to spend more than a few hours a day in the thoughts which occupy the imagination and a few hours a year on those which occupy the intellect alone. I have given all the rest of my time to the relaxation of the senses and the repose of the mind. And I include among all the exercises of the imagination all serious conversations and anything which needs to be done with attention.[88]

While it is tempting to think that Descartes is just trying to avoid having to deal with the problems his view faces, this passage provides yet another instance of my of where my overall methodology comes into play. To read Descartes as being disingenuous is to not only uncharitably read his response, but to ignore the systematic reasons that he might have for offering such an account. On the theological mysterian approach that I offer, we are in a significantly better position to read this passage, and take Descartes seriously. Again, on my view there are important limits to what can be achieved through pure intellection. That significant work remains to be done in order to achieve "fruitful" ends after having intuited *that* something is true would serve to explain why it is that Descartes need not reflect in such a way too often. On this view, Descartes is also providing a substantive response to Elisabeth—in effect, she needs to relax her intellect; she was overthinking the union of mind and body, and as I noted, trying to understand the union through the intellect alone which Descartes notes can only be done obscurely.

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[88] Letter to Elisabeth, 28 June, 1643 (CSMK, p. 227).

It is worth noting that Descartes's response to Elisabeth is not the only place where Descartes seems to imply that *first philosophy* should not be the primary focus for finite beings. In both the *Meditations* and the *Principles,* the very first sentence states explicitly that the project of engaging in the hyperbolic doubt should be undertaken "once in the course of my [his] life."[89] When we compare these sentiments with the passage above from the *Preface to the French Edition* of the *Principles*, and to the limits implicit in philosophical intuition, we recognize that traditional *a priori* investigation plays a less central role in the Cartesian project. That is not to say that philosophical intuition does not play a foundational role, or that it does not play an *important* role—to be sure, it is on his metaphysics that Descartes built his physics, and he does think that the metaphysics ground the rest of the sciences and allow for systematic knowledge (*scientia*), but once we have our assurances, we can move on, with our cognitive limitations well known.

89 *Principles* I.1 (CSM I, p. 193); *First Meditation*, (CSM II, p. 12).

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