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GOD, ETERNAL TRUTHS AND THE RATIONALITY OF THE WORLD IN DESCARTES*

abstract

In this paper I examine Descartes's thesis of the free creation of eternal truths in conjunction with what he claims to be the divine attributes known by us. Considering the Cartesian claims of God's simplicity and that eternal truths freely created by God include logical principles as the structure of finite minds, I argue that the Cartesian thesis of the free creation of eternal truths involves: a) God necessarily establishes (and thus creates) within/as himself all essences and truths, including those that to the finite intellect seem impossible; b) While establishing essences and truths, God instantiates (and thus creates) some of what to the finite intellect seems to be non-contradictory essences and truths as innate ideas in actual finite minds, and instantiates at least some of what seems to be non-contradictory essences and truths in the actual physical world and c) While establishing essences and truths, God may have instantiated in the actual world many (or all) of the essences and truths that the finite mind perceives to be contradictory, that is, those whose existence cannot be clearly and distinctly conceived by the finite mind and seem, therefore, impossible.

keywords

God, eternal truth, world, human knowledge

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1. Introduction It is well known that Descartes advances the strong thesis that God freely creates eternal truths. With this thesis, Descartes does not merely argue that everything (including eternal truths) depends on God, as is sustained by the Aristotelian scholastic tradition, but rather that everything (including eternal truths) depends on God's free will, such that God could have created things differently. This proposition does not appear in the text of any of Descartes's published books, but it does emerge in his correspondence from 1630 and 1649 and in his replies to two of the objections made to the *Meditations on First Philosophy*. It also appears in *Conversation with Burman*, which consists of Frans Burman's notes of his interview with Descartes that took place in 1648.

In this paper, I examine Descartes's thesis of the free creation of eternal truths in conjunction with what he claims to be the divine attributes known by us. I focus on the meaning of Descartes's claim that God "could have created things differently", considering that the eternal truths freely created by God include the logical principle of non contradiction, that is, the basic principle of human rationality. I argue that *as far as finite human intellects can conceive*, the Cartesian thesis of the free creation of eternal truths involves at least the following: a) God, being infinite and pure thought in act, *necessarily* establishes (and thus creates) within/as himself all essences and truths, including those that to the finite intellect seem impossible, since they appear contradictory; b) God, being omnipotent and/or indifferent, while establishing essences and truths, instantiates (and thus creates) some of what to the finite intellect seems to be non-contradictory essences and truths as innate ideas in actual finite minds, minds which are created with logical structures, and also instantiates in the actual physical world at least some of these seemingly non-contradictory essences and truths instantiated in finite minds; and c) although the finite human mind cannot conceive of them clearly and distinctly, God, while establishing essences and truths, may have instantiated in the actual world all of the essences and truths that the finite mind perceives to be contradictory, that is, those whose coexistence cannot be clearly and distinctly conceived by the finite mind and seem, therefore, impossible.¹ I will then turn to two examples in Descartes writings which confirm that Descartes is willing to admit that God has created in the world

¹ For Descartes's view that when a finite mind clearly and distinctly perceives an idea, it at least understands the meaning exhibited by the idea's content, and that this means that it perceives this content as not contradictory and that what is exhibited can exist in the world see, for example, AT 6: 71; CSM 2: 50.

things that the limited, finite mind understands as impossible to exist. Thus, my main claim here is that by introducing the free creation doctrine, Descartes seems to have allowed for an absurd actual world. This doctrine opens the possibility that God has created a world that cannot be understood by human basic rational principle.² Further, this is so not with respect to the mysterious truths of faith, such as transubstantiation or the Holy Trinity, which, according to Descartes, in spite of being obscure and confusing, can be clearly and distinctly accessed³ through divine illumination. My claim here is, rather, that the free creation doctrine opens the possibility of created truths (that is, truths from God's point of view and, therefore, truths in themselves) which, if grasped by human beings, are grasped through obscure and confused ideas in such a way that they can only appear as contradictory and absurd. Through the free creation doctrine Descartes admits the possibility of God's creating truths about which human beings cannot have clear and distinct ideas, either if regarded by reason. Moreover, based on the fact that, according to Descartes, we do have obscure and confused access at least to some of what seems to us to be the contradictions that are created by God, I contend that Descartes admits that God indeed created a world in which at least some of what human beings perceive as contradictions are truths. Although Descartes does not expressly argue for the creation of a meaningless world, the fact that he does admit that God creates at least some truths that seem absurd to finite minds confirms that the created world may contain many truths (since it contains at least some) that, according to him, the finite mind sees as contradictory or that are "beyond its understanding."

The paradigm of the eternal truths that are indicated by Descartes in different texts is mathematical truths. However, Descartes also includes in the list of eternal truths logical principles, as well as metaphysical, physical, and moral principles. The inclusion of logical principles among the things freely created by God is clear in various passages, such as, for example, the following from the *Principles of Philosophy*:

[T]he proposition, *Nothing comes from nothing*, is regarded not as a really existing thing, or even as a mode of a thing, but as an eternal truth which resides within our mind. ... The following are examples of this class: *It is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be at the same time; What is done cannot be undone; He who thinks cannot but exist while he thinks*; and countless others. [AT 8A: 24; CSM 1: 209]⁴

Along with the claim that the cited examples are eternal truths, this passage suggests that logical principles are created as the structure of the finite intellect, since Descartes states that, among others, the proposition "*It is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be at the same time*" must be considered as referring not to *really existent things*, nor as a *mode of something*, but rather as a certain eternal truth that has its locus *in our minds*. Thus, logical principles are created in the finite mind, though not as a contingent modification of it: it is not as if the finite

2. Eternal Truth, Logical Principles, and the Finite Intellect

² For opposite views refer to Ishiguro (1986) and Normore (1991).

³ For Descartes's discussion on the clarity and distinction of the ideas that come from grace, see his letter to Dinet [AT 7: 581; CSM 2: 392], his "Reply to the Second Objections" [AT 7: 147/148; CSM 2: 105], and his letter to Hyperaspistes [AT 3: 426; CSMK: 191].

⁴ References to Descartes' writings indicate the edition of *Oeuvres de Descartes* ed. by C. Adam & P. Tannery (AT), followed by the translation of Descartes works by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, and D. Murdoch, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (CSM), both followed by their respective volume and page numbers, or the translation of Descartes's correspondence by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch, and A. Kenny in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (CSMK), followed by page numbers.

mind is created in such a way that it sometimes thinks logically, as it sometimes doubts, loves, hates, and so on. In a letter to Arnauld, Descartes clarifies it: the logical principles configure the way the finite mind can think, that is, they constitute the finite mind's structure. As he writes:

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*. [AT 5: 224; CSMK: 358/359; emphasis added]

Moreover, as Descartes argues in the Fourth Meditation, this logical structure of the finite mind is what makes it limited. This becomes clear when Descartes asserts that the finite mind is endowed with two faculties: understanding, which is finite, passive, and responsible for conceiving ideas, and will, which is infinite, active, and responsible for every action, including any mental act that adds to the representations of understanding, such as when one wishes for something, asserts something, doubts something, and so on. As Descartes says, it is the infinitude of the will that makes the finite mind similar to God and the finitude of understanding that limits it [AT 7: 57-8; CSM 2: 39-40].

Since logical principles are created as the structure of the finite mind and as what limits it, it is reasonable to assert that the very concept of contradictoriness may be related solely to the human mind.⁵ What appears contradictory to the finite mind, and thus impossible to exist, seems to result from a limitation of such a mind that does not necessarily correspond to how things are in fact, that is, how things are from the viewpoint of the creator. Things created by God and, thus, from God's own viewpoint, can always coexist with each other. Thus, there exists a way that things are in fact, that is, as they are created by God, and in this way everything may coexist with everything else. The human mind, nevertheless, cannot perceive them as such. On the one hand, contradictions seem to result from the obscure way in which the finite mind combines certain ideas, as indicated by Descartes to Burman:

[T]here is no contradiction in things, but in our ideas alone. For it is ideas alone that we join together *in such a way* that they are inconsistent one with another. Things, by contrast, are not inconsistent with each other, since all of them can exist: so no one thing is inconsistent with any other. With ideas, the opposite is the case: in our ideas we join together and unite separate things, which taken on their own are not inconsistent. This is the origin of contradiction. . . . [T]he *conception you have of the combination and unity of the two ideas is not clear but extremely obscure*. (AT 5: 38, emphasis added)⁶

It seems that Descartes here is not only saying that things are distinct from each other and, therefore, in themselves, as God creates them, are not inconsistent with each other, but also that the inconsistency that the finite mind perceives concerning the coexistence of some of them results from its limited and muddled way of thinking. Thus, it is the finite mind that sees the coexistence of certain things as impossible, and this is not because it combines what cannot be combined, but because it combines ideas about things in a very obscure way. From God's point of view nothing is such that it cannot be, which seems to mean that it is

⁵ This line of interpretation is suggested by Wilson (2005), p. 110.

⁶ *Descartes' Conversation with Burman*, trans. Cottingham (1976), p. 25. This passage was not included in the CSMK volume.

possible that God can make anything coexist with anything. For example, in a letter to More, Descartes writes that he cannot say that God cannot do what he sees as contradictory:

And so I boldly assert that God can do everything which I perceive to be possible, *but I am not so bold as to assert the converse, namely that he cannot do what conflicts with my conception of things – I merely say that it involves a contradiction.* [AT 5: 272; CSMK: 363]

Similarly, in a letter to Mersenne, he declares, “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*” [AT 1: 146; CSMK: 23]; again, in a letter to Mesland, he says, “God cannot have been determined to make it true that contradictories cannot be true together, and therefore . . . he could have done the opposite” [AT 4: 118; CSMK: 235].

If God created these logical principles as the structure of finite intellects that limit them, then it is at least possible that in the act of creation God is not himself subject to logical principles, and this implies that God may indeed have created truths that the finite mind cannot conceive.

Up to now, as we have seen, it can only be asserted that God, in creating, may or may not be subject to created logical principles from all eternity. God creates logical principles in the finite mind but, it would seem, nothing stops him from following them in his single act of creation of everything. God could create logical principles and simultaneously use them throughout all his creation. It seems that given his omnipotence nothing stops him and, likewise, nothing obliges him to use created principles while creating everything, including these principles. However if we focus on what Descartes says we know of God’s nature, we are led to argue that he must admit the stronger thesis, according to which there is a sense in which God *cannot* be subject to logical principles. This is so not because God is sufficiently powerful not to be subject to what he creates. His omnipotence allows that he creates from eternity and is subjected to what he creates. Rather, we must admit, God cannot be subjected to the logical principles for two reasons that concern what, according to Descartes, we know about God’s very infinite essence. Note that, in spite of sustaining the incomprehensibility of God’s infinite power by the finite mind, Descartes also sustains that this finite mind can know at least some of God’s attributes:

But there are many things really in God, or which relate to God, which we are capable of reaching in our minds and expressing in word . . . And so in this sense God can be known and spoken of to a very great extent ... [AT 2: 284, CSMK: 169]

Before examining these two reasons, it is worth saying a word about what this overall reading of Descartes suggests. Since the Cartesian God is the creator of all things, including the finite mind’s structure and its particular thoughts (in the sense that he creates our mind with the disposition to think whatever particular thoughts we think), it is clear that anything a finite mind thinks that it knows about God, essences, minds and the actual world is governed by the operator “I clearly and distinctly perceive that.” What we think we know about anything is what God allows us to know. Further, this is so in such a way that, strictly speaking, it is the limitation of a finite mind that makes it consider that God cannot choose not to be subjected to logical principles. That is the way the finite mind perceives it. It is worth to mention that, according to Descartes, there is no way a finite mind can access what would be an absolute truth or an absolute falsity. What is perceived as unquestionably true by the finite mind is that which it clearly and distinctly perceives, according to its logical structure. However, if this is so, our perceptions of truth are the best of which we are capable of perceiving clearly

3. God’s Nature and Logical Limitation

and distinctly. This seems to be clear, for example, in Descartes' "Reply to the Second Set of Objections" to the *Meditations*:

First of all, as soon as we think that we correctly perceive something, we are spontaneously convinced that it is true. Now if this conviction is so firm that it is impossible for us ever to have any reason for doubting what we are convinced of, then there are no further questions for us to ask; *we have everything we could reasonably want*. What is it to us that someone may make out that the perception whose truth we are so firmly convinced of may appear false to God or an angel, so that it is absolutely speaking, false? *Why should this alleged 'absolute falsity' bother us, since we neither believe in it nor have even the smallest suspicion of it?* [AT VII: 144; CSM II: 103, emphasis added]

The first reason by which we understand that God cannot be subject to logical principles is based on the fact that we know, as becomes clear in Descartes's first proof God's existence, that he is infinite, which means that he has no limit of any kind. The formal reality of an infinite being is derived from the fact that a finite mind cannot be the cause of the infinite objective reality depicted in the idea of God. Besides that, we also know that what is infinite has no kind of limitation. As Descartes says in his reply to Caterus's objection concerning the possibility of a clear and distinct idea of the infinite: "It [the infinite] can still be understood, in so far as we can clearly and distinctly understand that something is such that *no limitations can be found in it*, and this amounts to understanding clearly that this thing is infinite" [AT 7: 112; CSM 2: 81; italics mine]. Since what we clearly and distinctly understand about the essence is true about the thing that has this essence, as Descartes asserts in the Fifth Meditation [AT 7: 65; CSM II: 45], then, to understand that God is infinite means that God is infinite. And, since we know that God is infinite, we know that he has no limitations. The absence of any limits in God is also clearly affirmed in the *Principles*, when Descartes distinguishes what is indefinite, or anything in which *we do not perceive a limit*, from what is infinite, or God, in which *we perceive that there is no limit*: "For in the case of God alone, not only do we fail to recognize any limits in any respect, but our understanding positively tells us that there are none" [AT 8A: 15; CSM 1: 202]. Now, if God is infinite in the sense in which he has no limits and if a logical structure is a limitation (of the created finite mind), then it is not that God may or may not be subject to logical principles, but rather that he necessarily is not subject to them. Given his infinitude, God could not choose to be subject to them as he could not choose not to exist, not to be omnipotent, and so on, since he has no limits at all.⁷

The second reason that leads me to assert that, in the Cartesian system, God, in creating, cannot be subject to logical principles is also based on what, according to Descartes, we know about God's infinite nature: his simplicity, unity, immateriality, and actuality. In the Third Meditation Descartes writes: "[T]he unity, the simplicity, or the inseparability of all the attributes of God is one of the most important of the perfections which I understand him to have." [AT 7: 51; CSM 2: 34] Note that, as well as affirming the simplicity and unity of God, Descartes, in this passage, also clearly admits that he understands that God has different perfections (in the plural), albeit inseparably. In other words, Descartes does not seem to be upholding the thesis that *we cannot distinguish them* in God. While the thesis of the simplicity and unity of God leads to the claim that in God there is no plurality of properties, it also seems to allow that we can, in some way, distinguish different aspects of God's infinitude.

⁷ For a discussion on the possibility of God choosing his nature, refer to Gueroult (1953) and Schmaltz (1991). Though based on different arguments, they both claim that God's nature cannot be altered even from eternity.

There is not a plurality of attributes in God, although we may refer to his single attribute – infinity--through different aspects of it (omnipotence, immutability, benevolence, etc.). Thus, Descartes appears to claim that while there is no real or modal distinction between the different properties *we perceive* in God, we distinguish them mentally, that is, conceptually. In *Principles* I, 60 [AT 8A: 29-30; CSM 1: 213], Descartes explains that a conceptual distinction, or distinction of reason, involves the basic idea that we can use different concepts to refer to essentially connected things or a single thing. If God is one, his properties are not separate in him. Although simple, God can be conceived of in diverse ways. Further, although we conceive of him in diverse ways, each of these ways is indeed it and all the others together. Because we know that God is infinite, we think of him as simple and one and as immutable, indivisible, immaterial, and pure actuality: He has no parts or modes and nothing in him is in potency. As Descartes puts it: “[G]od, who is the author of all things, is entirely perfect and unchangeable” [AT 3: 649, CSMK: 216/17]; “[S]ince being divisible is an imperfection, it is certain that God is not a body” [AT 8A: 13; CSM 1: 201]; “[G]od, on the other hand, I take to be actually infinite, so that nothing can be added to his perfection” [AT 7: 47; CSM 2: 32]. Thus, we know that God is a single, unchangeable, pure immaterial act, which, given Descartes’s economic ontology of two kinds of substances (the *res cogitans* or mind or soul and the *res extensa* or extended substance or body) and their modes, means that he is a single, pure intellectual act. As Descartes says, “God is pure intelligence.” [AT 10: 218; CSM 1: 5] God is, then, according to Descartes, the pure infinite thinking substance. Further, as a consequence of his simplicity, thinking, wishing, and creating are in him a single act, as Descartes asserts in, for example, the *Principles*: “[T]here is always a single identical and perfectly simple act by means of which he [God] simultaneously understands, wills, and accomplishes everything” [AT 8A: 14; CSM 1: 201]. God is at least a pure act of thinking/wishing/creating things. Hence, based on the attributes that we know of God, we can at least assert (1) that these attributes are identical to each other; (2) that God is infinite and pure thinking in act; and (3) that God’s action is eternal and singular.

Now, besides the attributes of God that Descartes admits to us knowing, we also recognize that they are in an infinite degree, so that, for example, what we understand as his understanding is an infinite understanding, as is clear in the Fourth Meditation:

If, for example, I consider the faculty of understanding I immediately recognize that in my case it is extremely slight and very finite, and I at once form the idea of an understanding which is much greater – indeed supremely great and infinite; and from the very fact that I can form the idea of it, I perceive that it belongs to the nature of God. [AT 7: 57; CSM 2: 39-40]

Because of God’s infinite understanding, it can be affirmed, then, that God thinks of all things. However, if thinking, willing, and creating are a single act then, by thinking all things, God wills and creates all things. The question then becomes what it means to say that God thinks all things. Now, in this context, “God thinks all things” could mean that God thinks of everything that the finite intellect, structured by logical principles, thinks and only this. If so, then we would have to admit that God is necessarily subject to logical principles, since what is thinkable for the finite intellect is what is in accordance with its finite constitution. Were God to think only like us, he would be, like us, subject to the finite constitution of our minds, which, as we have seen, would be against the thesis of God’s infinitude. However, “God thinks all things” could also mean that God thinks whatever he wishes, thereby limiting God’s thinking to his will. If this were so, we would have to admit that there is in God a faculty, namely the will, that is not only conceptually distinguished from the intellect, but is

paramount over it, which would contradict the thesis of the identity of his attributes. Hence, it seems, we have to admit that God “thinking all things” means that God’s thought is not limited in any way, which implies that he *necessarily* thinks what for us is thinkable and thus logically possible *and* what for us is unthinkable and thus logically impossible. Furthermore, if by thinking, God wills and creates, then there is a sense in which God *necessarily* thinks, wills, and creates what is thinkable by the finite intellect and what is not thinkable by it.

This reading of the Cartesian thesis of the free creation of eternal truth, according to which *there is a sense* in which God necessarily creates all the essences and truths, seems to collide with the very basis of the free creation thesis, that is, that God freely creates these essences and truths. Nonetheless, I suggest, based on the Cartesian concept of God’s nature, which involves his immateriality, infinite power, and indifference, it is reasonable to say that, this is only an apparent collision. According to Descartes, God’s freedom involves a positive indifference in such a way that he acts with no external determination. Descartes thus states, “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.” It is exactly because of this, that is, because God acts without any external determination from what was or will be the case that, as Descartes argues in the same passage, “the supreme indifference to be found in God is the supreme indication of his omnipotence” [AT7: 431/432; CSM2: 291]. Now, if God’s freedom consists at least in his acting without external coercion, to say that in following his own nature (of being a pure act of thinking all things), God necessarily thinks/creates all essences and truths means that God freely, though necessarily, creates these essences and truths. As Descartes explains to Burman, “We should not make a separation here between the necessity and the indifference that apply to God’s decrees: *although his actions were completely indifferent, they were also completely necessary*” [AT 5: 167; CSMK 347].

4. God’s Nature and Creation

Thus, as we saw, given his infinitude, God has no limits in any aspect and what he thinks, he wills and creates. In what follows I argue that God creates essences and truths in himself, as his own thoughts, which means that he causes himself, and in the same single act, he instantiates some in finite minds and some (or all) in the actual world.

Now, if, as stated above, God is a single pure thinking in act, then his essence is constituted, so to speak, “of the contents of his thought.” However, if God is simple and immutable, he has no parts or modes and, therefore, his act of thinking and the contents exhibited by this act are one and the same thing. As we saw with respect to all the different attributes we think God to have, the difference between God’s act and God can be only a distinction of reason, that is, a distinction that does not correspond to a distinction within God, but only a way the finite mind thinks about God. God has no modification, so the different acts which we might think of as his different acts are indeed identical to what he is. More than that, if there are no modifications or division in God, then whatever is involved in God’s act of being, is also identical to God.

Further, as we saw, God is a thinking act, so he is identical to this act and to whatever is involved in it. There is no such a thing as a content exhibited in what would be God’s intellect when he thinks. God is identical to a single pure act of thinking which does not depict any content but, rather, constitutes his own essence. God is identical to his own thoughts, which, strictly speaking, from God’s point of view, consist in one single act/content of being thought from eternity.⁸ Nevertheless, if, as we saw, what would be the “content of his thought” are all essences and truths, then God is the same as these essences and truths. This would appear to be confirmed by what Descartes says to Burman:

⁸ For a close but different approach on the plausibility of this thesis see Schmalz (2009) and Rozemond (2008).

Whatever is in God is not in reality separate from God himself; rather it is identical with God himself... 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 one not a real one. In reality the decrees could not be separated from God: he is not prior to them or distinct from them, nor could he have existed without them. [AT 5: 166; CSMK: 348]

If this is so, that is, if due to his immutability, simplicity, unity, and immateriality, God's creating essences and truths as "his thoughts" means that he creates them as himself, the essence of everything, then we have to admit that God is self-caused, which is indeed one of Descartes's innovating thesis in relation to tradition. The fact that the two theses--that is, the free-creation and the *causa sui* theses--are in an important way connected suggests that the Cartesian thesis of God as *causa sui* is not simply a consequence of his more general approach to causation (as asserts, for example, Gilson and latter Machamer & McGuire⁹), but rather an exigency of his free creation thesis: God's self-causation thesis, seems to be the only way available to guarantee the thesis that God freely creates the eternal truths which, as we saw, are identical to himself. However, this discussion is beyond the scope of this paper. Furthermore, according to Descartes, God in a single act freely creates not only essences and eternal truths, but also all that exists. This is what he says, for example, in his "Reply to the Third set of Objections": "[I]n demonstrating the existence of God we have also demonstrated that God created the entire world, or all things which exist apart from him" [AT 7: 188; CSM 2: 132]. Or, as Descartes says in his "Reply to the Sixth Objections," "[T]here can be nothing whatsoever which does not depend on [God]. This applies not just to everything that subsists, but to all order, every law, and every reason for anything's being true or good... [T]hey [eternal truths] depend on God alone, who, as the supreme legislator, has ordained them from eternity" [ATVII: 435; CSM II: 293-4]. As we saw, given his omnipotence and simplicity, God is self-caused and is what he thinks, that is everything (albeit eminently). If God is the cause of everything while thinking, and if there are other things besides God, then along with creating his infinite being as he thinks, God also creates what is finite. Thus, while because of his simplicity, whatever God thinks he creates, it seems to be the case that God in the very same act, in eternity, creates different essences with different modes of existence: as himself, some instantiated in finite minds, and some (or all) instantiated in the actual world. If God, is pure infinite thought in act, he is essentially (albeit eminently) all the things thought by him. In strict sense, says Descartes, God *creates* existences (in finite minds and/or in the actual world) and *establishes* eternal essences in himself as himself:

You ask what God did in order to produce them [the eternal truths]. 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 them and made them. [AT 1: 152-53; CSMK: 25]

As for created minds, since they are made as limited by logical principles, it is clear that God does not endow them with everything he thinks: "[I]t is not just that our understanding ranges over fewer objects than that of God: rather, it is extremely imperfect in itself, being obscure, mingled with ignorance, and so on" [AT 5: 158; CSMK: 341]. The finite mind is, therefore, as we saw, structurally limited. It not only cannot think certain ideas that God thinks, but

⁹ Gilson (1930) and Machamer & McGuire (2009).

even among the ones it can think, some cannot be thought clearly and distinctly. However, unlike the case of finite minds, Descartes does not seem to claim that the extended world is structurally limited. It is certain that the extended world is finite for, according to him, God creates any existent substance apart from him, which means that just by being created any substance is not infinite. The extended substance, as any other created thing, is finite in this sense. But Descartes seems to believe that, unlikely the thinking substance, the extended substance is finite but not structurally limited. All he says is that since we cannot clearly and distinctly perceive its limit, it might or might not have limits:

Having then no argument to prove, and not even being able to conceive, that the world has bounds, I call it *indefinite*. But I cannot deny on that account that there may be some reasons which are known to God though incomprehensible to me; that is why I do not say outright that it is *infinite* [AT 5: 52; CSMK: 320]

Thus, according to Descartes, though we recognize the finitude of the world in the sense that it is created, we cannot find any structural limit in it, and this means that it might have no limit. In the same way that it would be a limitation of God's infinitude, if he could not think what to the finite and limited intellect is unthinkable, it would also be a limitation, if he had to create as existent in the actual world everything he thinks or if he could not create in the actual world everything he thinks. Thus, if we cannot find limits to the extended world and if there is no limit to God's power, then, at least as a hypothesis, God may have put into the actual created world all that he thinks. Nothing determines God to think into the world only what we think he does.

Therefore, on the one hand, in spite of the simplicity of God, according to which what God thinks, he wills and creates, thinking, willing, and creating eternal truths does not mean necessarily creating them in the actual world, nor in the finite mind. On the other hand, though, it is reasonable to say that God may have created in the world everything he thinks or, at least, something that the created mind cannot conceive. God thinks everything and therefore creates as himself every essence and truth, but depending on the way he thinks them, these essences and truths have (or have not) counterparts in the physical actual world or in the finite mind. Further, if the finite mind is limited and God is not, it is possible that not everything God creates is knowable by this mind. As Descartes says, "And how do we know that God has not produced an infinite number of kinds of creatures, and thus, as it were, poured forth his power in the creation of things?" [AT 5:168; CSMK: 349]

Now, if, on the one hand, Descartes does not expressly say that he thinks that God has indeed created in the actual world everything that he thinks but that is unconceivable to the finite mind, on the other hand, he mentions at least two cases that indicate that he believes that God has indeed created in it some of these things. According to Descartes, we clearly and distinctly perceive that God pre-ordains everything from eternity, and we also clearly and distinctly perceive the real distinction between the body and the soul. Besides that, we have intimate experiences of our freedom and of the union of our bodies to our minds. This means that somehow we have access at least to these pairs of what we clearly and distinctly perceived as contradictories:¹⁰ a pre-ordained world where there are free beings and a being that is a union

¹⁰ There is an enormous amount of secondary literature about the possibility of dissolving these, at least apparent, pairs of contradiction (for a list of it, refer to C.P. Ragland (2005). In this paper, however, I am taking seriously what, as we will see, Descartes expressly says in this connection: those theses (of our freedom, God's preordination of everything, real distinction between body and soul, and their intimate union) appear to us as contradictories and, therefore beyond our comprehension, but, in spite of that, correspond to what God created in the actual world.

of two things that exclude each other.

In a letter to Elizabeth of Bohemia, Descartes suggests that at least one of God's creations appears to the finite intellect as involving a contradiction, which therefore, cannot be clearly and distinctly conceived: the union of body and soul, the union of two real distinct and opposite substances. He says, "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" [AT 3: 693; CSMK: 227]. Although, according to Descartes, the finite mind cannot conceive the possibility, God has created human being as the union of body and soul, that is, the union of two really distinct substances that are "not only different, but in some way opposite" [AT 7: 13; CSM 2: 10].¹¹ As it is clear from the Sixth Meditation, the finite mind has a clear and distinct idea that body and soul are really distinct [AT 7: 78; CSM 2: 54] and exclusive of one another. However, because of sensible experiences such as pain, thirst, and so on, the finite mind perceives that it is closely joined to a particular body that forms with it a unit. Thus, says Descartes, the union of body and soul can "only obscurely [be conceived] by the intellect alone or even by the intellect aided by the imagination, but it is known very clearly by the senses" [AT 3: 691; CSMK: 227]. The way the finite mind has access to the union and to the distinction of body and soul is different but, nevertheless, they are both truths. Nevertheless, as shown by the passages mentioned above, though they are both true at the same time, the finite mind cannot make sense of or clearly and distinctly understand them being true at the same time. The contradiction rests in the fact that through our finite minds we know that mind and body are two distinct and exclusive substances and, in spite of that, through our bodies we apprehend that they are in an intimate single substantial union. The fact that the real distinction is known through a clear and distinct perception of the mind and that the union is known through confused sensations does not preclude that both are equally true and known. If this is so, human beings somehow have access to at least this pair of truths that, nevertheless, they perceive as a contradiction. Another indication that Descartes thinks that God has indeed created as existing in the actual world things that appear as contradictory to our finite mind or, as he says, things that are "beyond our comprehension" is found in the *Principles*, when in introducing the question of the possible compatibility between the theses of divine preordination and human liberty, Descartes asserts, "[W]e can easily get ourselves into great difficulties if we attempt to reconcile this divine preordination with the freedom of our will, or attempt to grasp both these truths at once" [AT 8A: 20; CSM 1: 206]. As for the preordination, writes Descartes,

[A]ll the reasons that prove that God exists and is the first and immutable cause of all effects that do not depend on human free will prove similarly, I think, that *he is also the cause of all effects that do so depend...* [P]hilosophy by itself is able to discover that the slightest thought could not enter into a person's mind without God's willing, and have willed from all eternity, that it should so enter. [AT 4:314; CSMK: 272, emphasis added]

Therefore, through a clear and distinct idea, the finite mind knows that God exists and is the creator of all the finite mind's thoughts, which includes its will. In spite of this, Descartes also holds that "the supreme perfection of man is that he acts freely or voluntarily, and it is this which makes him deserve praise or blame" [AT 8A: 18; CSM 1: 205]. Moreover, the finite

¹¹ It is clear from Descartes's identification of the substance with its principal attribute that he admits body and soul to be exclusive of one another. Refer to AT 8B: 349; CSM 1: 298.

mind also has a clear and distinct idea of this freedom, which is self-evident, as he says in the *Principles*: “[W]e have such close awareness of the freedom and indifference which is in us, that there is nothing we can grasp more evidently or perfectly” [AT 8A: 20; CSM 1: 206]. Thus, according to Descartes, God is so powerful that somehow he preordains free choices, though we cannot conceive how this is so, since their coexistence seem to be contradictory and, therefore, impossible on our viewpoint. But, says Descartes, “[I]t 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” [AT8A: 20; CSM 1: 206]. Again, although the finite mind cannot clearly and distinctly conceive that at the same time both that human being is free and that God preordain everything, that is how God has created the world.¹²

Thus, based on his free creation and God’s infinite nature doctrines, it is reasonable to think that Descartes admits that in a single and very complex act of being/thinking God creates essences and eternal truths in three different modes of existence: as himself, in the actual world, and in actual finite mind (and they do not necessarily match each other). If this is so, we may conclude that it is also reasonable to say that, for Descartes, God has actually created in the world at least some (and might have created all) of the things that he thinks but that seems impossible to the finite mind.

5. Final Considerations

We have concluded that, according to Descartes, in a single pure act of thinking, God exists and thus establishes essences as his infinite intellect (which is the whole of himself), instantiating in the finite intellect some of them (those that are logically conceivable) and instantiating in the formal world, some or all of these essences thought and established by and as himself. The finite intellect can clearly and distinctly perceive that God necessarily creates all the essences as himself, instances some of these essences as the content of ideas in finite minds, instances some of them in the actual world, but perhaps it cannot clearly and distinctly perceive all the essences God instantiates in the world.

The interpretative hypothesis of the thesis of the free creation of the eternal truths presented here seems to lead at least to the following problem: If it is correct, then we have to sustain that Descartes admits the possibility of an actual world created by God (or part of it) that makes no sense to the finite mind, that is, a world unintelligible from the viewpoint of human beings. Given this hypothesis that God necessarily thinks of all essences and truths and also given that God may have thought them all as actually existing, it is, perhaps, necessary to admit that in the Cartesian system God, is deceptive, in a certain sense: he structures the human intellect with cognitive faculties that operate according to logical principles, which, however, might prevent this intellect from knowing the actual world. God would not be deceptive in the strict sense of implanting clear and distinct false ideas in the finite mind, but deceptive in another sense, namely, that despite creating the human mind with principles and a conceptual system to know allegedly the world, which seems to imply that the world is rationally comprehensible, God creates things in the world that the finite mind, structured by him in this way, is incapable of knowing.

If God freely creates the logical principles in the finite minds and is not himself subject to it in his only act of creating everything, then it is plausible to admit that in spite of the fact that finite minds can not conceive how, it might be the case in the actual world not only that what is clear and distinct known is true, but also that its contradiction is true in God’s point of view. Given his infinity, God necessarily creates as essences truths that contradict logical truths and

¹² For an at least apparently opposite view refer to Ragland (2005).

might have instantiated all or some of them in actual world. In this sense, any truth achieved by finite human mind is restricted to what humans can conceive, but is not necessarily absolutely truth. And this would include the truths alleged proved in Descartes's *Meditations* such as my existence, God's existence, his veracity, and so on. There would be no guarantee of absolute knowledge by human finite minds. Reason would not be the ensured source of knowledge, but rather the indubitable source of knowledge. Because it is not dubitable, reason has the best credentials for being the source of human knowledge. This seems to be what Descartes means when he says:

What is it to us that someone may make out that the perception whose truth we are so firmly convinced of may appear false to God or an angel, so that it is absolutely speaking, false? *Why should this alleged 'absolute falsity' bother us, since we neither believe in it nor have even the smallest suspicion of it?* [AT VII: 144; CSM II: 103; emphasis added].

Judging by the way in which Descartes preserves divine veracity in relation to the senses, it does not seem implausible that God, though truthful, has created an actual world resistive to the human intellect.

If my reading is correct, that is, if Descartes's free creation doctrine involves that human mind does not reach absolute truth, then either we admit that Descartes's whole metaphysical project fails or we move Descartes away from a project in which he is pursuing the guarantee of reason as the source of absolute truth (that is, truth from the point of view of the creator) towards a project that involves considering reason only as the best candidate for achieving the truth relative to humans limitation. If the latter, God's role in Cartesian system has to be revised. But this discussion goes beyond the scope of this paper.

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