

Descartes's Theory of Modality

Jonathan Bennett

(from *The Philosophical Review* 103, 4 (1994))

1. Introduction

Descartes propounded the allegedly strange, peculiar, curious, and incoherent doctrine that necessary truths are made true by God's voluntary act.¹ It seems to imply that God could have made necessary truths false, which entails that they are not necessary after all. Some of Descartes's interpreters have taken him in that way, as firmly implying that nothing is absolutely necessary or impossible.² We all know, however, that if this doctrine runs free through Descartes's philosophical work it will do untold damage: many of his arguments have to be protected somehow from the thesis that so-called necessary truths are really contingent. Discussing an argument of Descartes's for the real distinction between body and mind, for example, Curley writes: 'If we were to invoke the doctrine of the creation of eternal truths, we might say that a really omnipotent being could cause the mind and body to exist apart even if that were not logically possible. But in the *Meditations* Descartes is careful not to

invoke that extravagant conception of omnipotence, and we would do him no service by bringing it in.'³ That typifies the kind of thing Cartesian scholars have felt forced to say, charitably shielding Descartes from his own splatter.

This 'creation' or 'voluntarism' doctrine does not appear in the *Meditations*, the *Discourse on the Method*, or the *Principles of Philosophy*. Descartes first declared it in three private letters to Marin Mersenne, most of a decade before his first published work appeared. It glows luminously just behind something Descartes wrote in reply to the Second Objections to the *Meditations*, as we shall see; and he announced it openly in his response to (Gassendi's) Fifth Objections. Descartes had described the essences of things as 'immutable and eternal', Gassendi had demurred at giving that label to anything but God, and Descartes replied—unlimbering his voluntarism doctrine—that God causes everything that is immutable and eternal. The authors of the Sixth Objections, who had seen the Fifth

¹ Strange: Nicholas Jolley, *The Light of the Soul: Theories of Ideas in Leibniz, Malebranche, and Descartes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 32. Peculiar: *ibid.*, 49; and Louis Loeb, *From Descartes to Hume: Continental Metaphysics and the Development of Modern Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 68. Curious: *ibid.*, 67. Incoherent: Edwin Curley, *Behind the Geometrical Method: A Reading of Spinoza's Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 42.

² See especially H. G. Frankfurt, 'Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths', *Philosophical Review* 86 (1977): 36–57.

³ Edwin M. Curley, *Descartes against the Skeptics* (Cambridge, Harvard U.P., 1978), 198.

Replies, challenged Descartes on his voluntarism, and he responded forthrightly. Furthermore, when first announcing the doctrine he urged Mersenne to 'assert and proclaim [it] everywhere'. His reason for keeping the doctrine out of sight in the major published works was evidently not that he was unsure of its truth. How, then, can it be all right to attribute to him arguments and opinions which obviously conflict with it? Yet that is what Curley does, and what I have often done in lectures, crediting Descartes with thoughts which conflict with his 'voluntarist' thesis about necessary truths, and arguments which collapse under its weight. We have thereby implied things like this: Descartes offered an argument from which he concluded that his mind is one thing, his body another; if voluntarism is true, the argument fails; at the time of writing the argument Descartes believed voluntarism. This implies that Descartes behaved dishonestly. His reason for not revealing his voluntarism doctrine in the *Meditations*, whatever it was, cannot excuse his writing things that are condemned by it. 'Descartes offered his all-important argument for "the real distinction" while believing that it collapses when the whole truth about modality comes to bear on it'—no one should believe this.

In fact Descartes showed no awareness, ever, of voluntarism's threatening the rest of his work. Either he had a blind spot in this direction or we have misunderstood his doctrine about necessary truths. I shall defend the latter option, showing how to read the voluntarism texts so that they do not obviously undermine Descartes's other work. The reading I shall offer has been adumbrated by others, but nobody has developed it explicitly and accepted it outright, as I shall do.¹ It fits nearly everything in the texts, one of

which positively requires it; and the philosophical doctrine it attributes to Descartes harmonizes as well as possible with the rest of his philosophy, and also—dare I add?—has a chance of being true.

My interpretation fits nearly everything in the voluntarism texts: this late in the day nobody will discover that the texts consistently express a single view; nothing can clear them of the charge of wavering sometimes. Still, rereading them in the light of my interpretation, I have been struck by how little my Descartes has to apologize for.

Descartes's voluntarism on my account of it harmonizes as well as possible with the rest of his philosophy; I should explain that too. When wrestling with skepticism in the *Meditations*, Descartes had two understandings of what his problem was, and two lines of thought as solutions. He needed to choose one problem and one solution, but he did not do so, evidently because he was not properly aware of this doubleness in his thought. Now, voluntarism as I understand it nicely fits in with one of those two lines of thought; no coherent doctrine could harmonize with both. I shall explain all this in section 6.

2. Greatness and omnipotence

The voluntarism doctrine comes in part from a religious impulse. Roughly and briefly: as a Christian believer wishing to magnify God as a being who is not limited in any way, Descartes went to the extreme of denying that there are even logical limits to what God can do. The other half of the story, which concerns a philosophical grounding for voluntarism, interests me more. Still, we should try to get the religious part right, as that will help us to understand the other.

¹ For a useful discussion of previous work, ending with a hint of the interpretation to be offered here, see Lilli Alanen, 'Descartes, Omnipotence, and Kinds of Modality', in *Doing Philosophy Historically*, ed. Peter H. Hare (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1988), 182–96. Another hint—more than a hint, really—will be reported at the end of section 3 below.

Some writers on this topic assume that the governing theological idea was that of God's omnipotence. Margaret Wilson, for example, gives to her very interesting section on this matter the title 'A God who can do anything'.¹ Geach also takes Descartes to be relying on the concept of omnipotence, and scolds him for it. The claim 'God can do anything', he says, is acceptable as piety, a vague way of magnifying God's greatness, but not as the premise of any argument.² Descartes did not use it as a premise. One of the voluntarism texts describes God in passing as all-powerful (*tout-puissant*), but not so as to derive voluntarism from the premise that God can do anything.³ The texts draw their energy from a thought of God not as omnipotent but as 'great' in such a way that everything that exists depends upon him. There are therefore—so the thought goes—no independent principles that constrain his actions, and no independent standards by which he can be judged. This lack of constraint is akin to the thought of God's omnipotence, but differs from it in not being open to Geach's criticism.

The emphasis on everything's depending on God, this being demanded by piety and respect, shines out from the first letter to Mersenne: 'The mathematical truths that you call eternal have been laid down by God and depend on him entirely, no less than the rest of his creatures. Indeed, to say that these truths are independent of God is to talk of him as

if he were Jupiter or Saturn and to subject him to the Styx and the Fates.⁴ The emphasis remains in the second letter, three weeks later:

'The eternal truths. . . 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 God's knowledge of it. . . So we must not say that if God did not exist nonetheless 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 derive. 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.'⁵

This does not say or even hint that God can do anything. The same holds for a passage in the response to Gassendi: 'If anyone attends to the immeasurable greatness of God he will find it manifestly clear that there can be nothing whatsoever which does not depend on him. This applies not just to everything that subsists, but to all order, every law, and every reason for anything's being true or good.'⁶

Here is a voluntarism text in which, unusually, Descartes mentions omnipotence:

¹ Margaret Wilson, *Descartes* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 120ff. The phrase comes from the First Meditation, CSM 2:14 ('omnipotent'), AT 7:21 (*qui potest omnia*). 'CSM' abbreviates 'John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch, eds., *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985 and 1991), vol. 1; and 'AT' abbreviates 'Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, eds., *Oeuvres de Descartes, nouvelle présentation* (Paris: Vrin, 1974–1986), vol. 1.'

² P. T. Geach, 'Omnipotence', *Philosophy* 48 (1973): 7–20. See also Richard L. La Croix, 'The Impossibility of Defining "Omnipotence"', *Philosophical Studies* 32 (1977): 181–90.

³ Third letter to Mersenne, CSM 3:25, AT 1:152; that is, the third of the three letters in which voluntarism is launched.

⁴ First letter to Mersenne, CSM 3:23, AT 1:145.

⁵ Second letter to Mersenne, CSM 3:24, AT 1:149f.

⁶ Replies to Sixth Objections, CSM 2:293f., AT 7:435f.

'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.'¹

The phrase 'depends on his omnipotence', however, is driven by the thought of dependence, not that of omnipotence in the sense of the ability to do anything. The passage would not collapse if we replaced that phrase by 'depends on him'. The first sentence might seem to involve omnipotence, but it does not. It says *For no x ought we to say that God could not do x*, which differs from *For all x, God could do x*. I shall expound the difference in section 7.

The 'nothing independent' thought also led Descartes, as it has others, to hold that there are no moral standards that are independent of God's will. We have just seen the moral and the modal running in a single harness ('truth and goodness'), as they do again here:

'It is self-contradictory [*repugnat*] 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 envisage anything's being thought of in the divine intellect as good, or worthy of action or omission, prior to the decision of the divine will to make it so. 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. 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.'²

The moral half of this has no direct link with 'God can do anything', and Descartes cannot have thought that it does. This further confirms that the same holds for the logical half. What fuels the passage is purely the view that everything true or real depends on God's will.

Indeed, did Descartes believe that God can do anything? He warns us against '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',³ and that cuts two ways. Someone who is sure that God is omnipotent might well enjoin us not to 'set limits' to what God can do, but why should he say that we cannot 'grasp' what he can do? And why should he go on—as Descartes does—to warn us that 'God is infinite and beyond our comprehension'? Anyone who asserts 'God can do everything' implicitly claims to grasp what God can do. Furthermore, if Descartes thought that God is omnipotent, he was absurdly understating his position every time he said that 'God can bring about whatever we clearly perceive in a way exactly corresponding to our perception of it'.⁴

¹ Letter to Arnauld, CSM 3:358f., AT 5:223f.

² Replies to Sixth Objections, CSM 2:291, AT 7:431f. Quoted with some omissions.

³ *Meditations*, Preface to the Reader, CSM 2:8, AT 7:9.

⁴ Replies to Second Objections, CSM 2:119. AT 7:169.

3. God's doings and our limits

In his voluntarist doctrine Descartes offered two things at once: a thesis about the greatness of God and a philosophical analysis of modal concepts. I have discussed the former and the religious impulse that underlies it. The philosophical analysis may have been driven partly by that same impulse: Descartes's analysis of modality entails that *if God created the world then he is not limited by logic*, so Descartes may have been drawn to it by its yielding a result that he wanted on religious grounds. But the analysis is independently plausible, and might be favored even by an atheist;¹ so Descartes could have been confirmed in his 'no independent limits' theology by having a good-looking philosophical analysis that leads to it.

I shall come to the analysis through this fact: In several voluntarism texts, including one already quoted, Descartes juxtaposes (i) a thesis relating necessary truths to God with (ii) a thesis relating them to us. If we illustrate (i) with *It is not impossible for God to make an uphill without a downhill*; then (ii) is illustrated by *We cannot conceive of an uphill without a downhill*. These two evidently struck Descartes as natural companions—but why? What did he think they have to do with one another? Most previous writers accept this pairing without comment, as though its rationale were obvious. I do not find it so.

If we understood (i) as entailing that there could be an uphill without a downhill because God could create one, the companion thesis could be (ii) that we (wrongly) think there could not be an uphill without a downhill because we cannot conceive of it. On this reading, (i) says there is only one modality, and (ii) explains why we think there are more.

This links the two all right, but at the prohibitive price of a reading of (i) that turns voluntarism into a rogue elephant crashing destructively through the rest of Descartes's work. Rejecting that, let us ask again: What is (ii), and how does it connect with (i)?

If we construe (i) as saying that God made it impossible for there to be an uphill without a downhill, and decline to infer that really it is not impossible at all, then we can reasonably conjoin this with (ii) understood as a thesis about modal epistemology. Thus, (i) says that God set up the modal truths, and (ii) says that he gave us limits to conception as a guide to what the modal truths are. The story runs like that in Margaret Wilson's treatment of this matter: 'God has created our minds in such a way that we cannot directly conceive the opposite of things he has willed to be necessary or eternal.'² In Wilson's view, (ii) God set limits to what we can conceive, as his way of giving us epistemic access to the modal facts, and (i) he established those facts in the first place. These two propositions sit side by side, merely conjoined.

Wilson takes them to be parts of one item which she calls 'the creation doctrine'. She remarks that (ii) could be involved in Descartes's treatment of the 'Deceiving God Hypothesis' in the Third Meditation, putting the point like this:

Descartes's creation doctrine in itself requires him to think of the human understanding as limited and constrained by God in certain respects. And this naturally if not logically leads to the consideration that God, if perhaps malevolent, could in general be manipulating our thought to deprive us of access to the truth. (127f.)

¹ For a nontheistic version of something like it, see my 'On Being Forced to a Conclusion', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* supp. vol. 35 (1961): 15–34.

² *Descartes*, 127. Page references in the text through the end of this section are to this book.

She acknowledges, though, that this appeals only to (ii) God's way of informing us about what the modal truths are, and owes nothing to (i) his creation of them. Descartes does not need voluntarism in order to conclude that God constrains our understandings and could through those constraints mislead us. Anyway, at this stage in the Third Meditation Descartes did not need to assert that proposition, but only to say that he did not know it to be false. In this part of the argument, voluntarism sits idle. (Wilson also finds another role for it in the treatment of skepticism; I shall come to that in my final section.)

A bit before this, however, Wilson sketches a treatment of voluntarism which relates (i) integrally to (ii). She writes: 'Descartes did regard the "necessity" we perceive in mathematical propositions as in some sense and degree a function of the constitution of our minds—themselves finite "creatures"' (125). So: necessity is a function of how the human mind is; the mind is a creature; so necessity is a creature too. That would unite the theses (i) that God created modal truths and (ii) that we cannot conceive of impossibilities. They would come together in the doctrine that God made us unable to conceive of certain things, and this was his making those things impossible. We could say that God created modal truths *by* making us unable to conceive of impossibilities, but let us be careful not to think of this in terms of means to ends.

I shall start to develop that line of thought in my next section.

Wilson herself does not make anything of it. Rather, she continues in a way that seems to change the subject:

'[This] position was far from wild, or excessively idiosyncratic. From Hume and Kant onward it has been widely held that alleged perceptions of "necessity" cannot be taken for granted, and that we must in

some sense or other have recourse to the structure and workings of our own minds to give an account of these "perceptions".' (125)

These remarks ostensibly about our *perceptions of necessity* were probably meant to stay with the theme of *the necessity that we perceive*. Obviously, we did not need Hume or Kant to tell us that our perceptions of necessity depend on the constitution of our minds. Be that as it may, Wilson does nothing more with her passing suggestion that Descartes had a subjectivist theory about the nature of necessity—no perceptions of necessity but the thing itself. I shall now pick up that suggestion and run with it.

4. A conceptualist analysis of the modal concepts

Descartes held, I submit, that our modal concepts should be understood or analyzed in terms of what does or does not lie within the compass of our ways of thinking. Roughly speaking: 'It is absolutely impossible that P' means that no human can conceive of P's obtaining while having P distinctly in mind; and similarly for P's possibility and its necessity. In each of these analyses, 'no human can' must be understood in causal, psychological terms, and not as involving the absolute or logical modalities that are being analyzed. On this account, the statement (ii) about what we can conceive provides all the content we are entitled to give to our modal statements; and that is why (i) we ought not to think of modal truths as a part of what God has to reckon with.

The authors of the Second Objections said that Descartes's a priori argument for God's existence requires the further premise that the concept of God which it employs is a possible one. His response provides the strongest evidence I have for my reading of the voluntarism texts:

'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 because... [etc., etc.]. Alternatively, you may well be inventing 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... will undermine the whole of human knowledge.¹

Where I put 'inventing', CSM has 'imagining' (the verb is '*fingere*'). Either way, Descartes is treating the 'possibility which relates to the object itself' as a contrivance, something faked up for purposes of argument rather than part of our natural conceptual repertoire. He denies it a life of its own: if the objective concept does not keep in step with the subjective one, he says, it will be direly subversive. He describes the subjective concept of possibility, which makes it a relation to our concepts, as the common meaning of the term 'possible'. So he is offering an analysis of modality, a conceptualist analysis—taking 'concepts' to be aspects of the human condition, of course, not entities belonging to a Fregean third realm.

This analysis provides a solid basis for Descartes's modal epistemology. He frequently moved from something's being distinctly conceivable to its being possible, as when he wrote: 'Everything which I clearly and distinctly understand is capable of being created by God so as to correspond exactly with my understanding of it.'² We have already seen one striking instance of this—run contrapositively—in the passage about God's lack of moral limits, where Descartes calls something self-contradictory because he cannot envisage it. That conforms to the spirit of his writing that 'we should think that

whatever conflicts with our ideas is absolutely impossible and involves a contradiction'.³

In the *Meditations* and elsewhere Descartes got from conceivability to possibility through trust in God, rather than through the conceptualist analysis of modality. Because he chose to keep his voluntarism out of sight in those works, he could not expect to be understood or believed if he relied upon it in any of his arguments; so he had to settle for getting 'possible' from 'conceivable' theologically. This is compatible with his having, ultimately, an analytic basis for the move. Theology provides one reason why the move is safe; philosophical analysis provides another.

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 (this being a truism for Descartes), it follows that God gives modal truths their status as truths. He made it necessarily true that $2 + 2 = 4$ by making us unable to conceive otherwise. 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 the theology, and is not a distraction from it or a rival or alternative to it.

5. The bootstraps problem

The doctrine that God created all the modal truths sits at an awkward angle to Descartes's thesis that God's existence is absolutely necessary. It seems to imply that a peculiar boot-strapping procedure has gone on: God selected the principles of necessity, which rewarded him by guaranteeing his existence! This has led some to suppose that Descartes's

¹ Replies to Second Objections, CSM 2:107, AT 7:150f.

² Sixth Meditation, CSM 2:54, AT 7:78.

³ Letter to Gibieuf, CSM 3:202, AT 3:476.

doctrine about necessary truths was not meant to apply to propositions about God's own nature and existence.¹ The texts provide little basis for this exclusion, but Curley argues that Descartes might have had a philosophical reason for it, so that it is not a purely ad hoc gerrymander.² Anyway the exclusion is better than what seemed to be the only alternative—namely, voluntarism creates the bootstraps problem, and Descartes alone fails to see this. Now, however, we see a third option: there is no bootstraps problem. Necessarily God exists; that is, when we are thinking clearly it is inconceivable to us that God should not exist. Because God gave us our limits, it is he who has made it inconceivable to us that he should not exist, but there is no paradox or circle or other problem in that. When voluntarism is based on the conceptualist analysis of modality, the bootstraps problem vanishes.

You may want to object: 'You have extricated Descartes from the tangle of bootstraps by weakening his theology from the momentous and cosmic proposition (a) that it is absolutely necessary that God exists, to the humdrum and local truth (b) that we cannot conceive that God should not exist.' That objection implies that (b) is weaker than (a), which amounts to rejecting the conceptualist analysis of modality. Even if you are right to reject it, however, my hypothesis that Descartes accepted it is all I need to abolish the bootstraps problem. If Descartes believed the conceptualist analysis of modality, and based voluntarism on it, he was not threatened with any paradox in relating the latter to the thesis that necessarily God exists. Q.E.D.

A slightly different objection: 'It is natural—indeed, it is almost inevitable—that one should think of God's existing necessarily as explaining why God exists. Your Descartes, however, cannot see it in that way. Nobody could think that God's existence is explained by there being certain limits to what we can conceive—let alone by his having set them! That shows how radically your Descartes has departed from some natural ways of thinking, and so it is some evidence that you have misunderstood the real Descartes.' For this objection to have much force, there must be evidence that Descartes was one of those philosophers who have thought that 'Why is it the case that P?' might be answered by 'Necessarily P'. There are such philosophers, and they may feel their position to be natural and even inevitable; but Descartes was not of their number, at least with respect to the existence of God. His a priori argument for God's existence occurs not in the metaphysical context of 'Why does God exist?' but in the epistemological context of 'How can we be absolutely sure that God exists?' When led by his critics to address the metaphysical question, Descartes never answered it in terms of necessity. To Caterus he wrote that God 'does not need' an efficient cause because he 'possesses such great and inexhaustible power that he never required the assistance of anything else in order to exist'.³ In a 'geometrical' arrangement of his views, one of the axioms says this: 'The immensity of God's nature is the cause or reason why he needs no cause in order to exist.' And in reply to Arnauld he wrote that 'the reason why God does not need any efficient cause in order to exist depends

¹ Edwin M. Curley, 'Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths', *Philosophical Review* 93 (1984): 569–97, at 592–97; Martial Gueroult, *Descartes selon l'ordre des raisons*, vol. 2 (Paris: Aubier, 1953), 26–29.

² Such textual basis as there is for it is presented by Margaret Wilson, *Descartes*, 123f.

³ Replies to First Objections, CSM 2:78, AT 7:108f. The next two quotations are from, respectively: Replies to Second Objections, CSM 2:116, AT 7:165; Replies to Fourth Objections, CSM 2:162, AT 7:231f.

on. . . the very immensity of God.' In these passages that face the question 'Why does God exist?', the idea of his existing necessarily is conspicuously absent.

6. Necessity and truth

A third objection, which seems like a strengthened version of the second, goes like this: 'The position you credit Descartes with taking does not let us infer that God exists from its being necessary that he does. More generally, it does not license the inference from *Necessarily P* to *P*. Descartes would surely have been aware of that and would have found it intolerable.' Not so fast! The subjectivist analysis of modality with which I have credited Descartes does secure this result: If necessarily *P* then no human being can believe that not-*P*. Someone in a muddle might have an affirmative attitude to a sentence which means that not-*P*, but such a person cannot be thinking clearly, cannot really have his mind around the thought that not-*P* and be assenting to it. While we are thinking clearly, then, the move from *Necessarily P* to *P* is settled, an immovably built-in part of our scheme of things.

Renewed objection: 'Stop pretending not to understand! You point out that on that theory of modality nobody can disbelieve a necessary proposition, because nobody can even understand the state of affairs in which it is false. But you were supposed to address the question about how *P*'s necessity relates not to our acceptance of *P* but rather to *P*'s truth.' This objector relies on a distinction which Descartes often implicitly rejected. Running through his thought was an intensely subjectivist strand, in which issues about what is really the case are displaced by or even equated with issues

about what to believe or about what can be believed. When writing in this vein, Descartes

- launched the *Meditations* as a pursuit of beliefs that were 'stable and likely to last',
- highlighted propositions which 'we cannot ever think of without believing them to be true',
- attended to the situation of someone who 'is certain that he is not being deceived, and is compelled to give his assent to' a given proposition,
- accorded a privilege to 'certain common notions' of whose truth our mind, 'for as long as it attends to them, is completely convinced',
- used the phrase 'may appear false to God or an angel' as a preferred alternative to '[may be], absolutely speaking, false',
- brushed aside a suggestion about falsehood thus: 'What do we care about this [alleged] absolute falsity, since we neither believe in it nor have even the smallest suspicion of it?'
- said of a similar threat that it was 'no objection' because 'the evident clarity of our perceptions does not allow us to listen to anyone who makes up this kind of story.'

In short, there was in Descartes a wide, deep, vivid streak of subjectivism or pragmatism about truth—a willingness to treat results about the settlement of belief as though they were results about how things stand in reality, or as though the former mattered and the latter did not.¹ When in that frame of mind, he would equate our finding not-*P* inconceivable with our discovering that *P*, and would have the only kind of warrant for 'If necessarily *P*, then *P*' that interested him.

¹ For details and references, see my 'Truth and Stability in Descartes's Treatment of Scepticism', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, supp. vol. 16 (1990): 75–108. A similar view is expressed in Louis Loeb, 'The Priority of Reason in Descartes', *Philosophical Review* 99 (1990): 30–43, and was adumbrated by Jaegwon Kim, 'What is Naturalized Epistemology?' (1988), reprinted in his *Supervenience and Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), at 219.

The best and most disciplined parts of Descartes's struggle with skepticism in the *Meditations* belong to this subjectivist strand in his thought. But there was also an objectivist or realist strand, in which he tried to argue from indubitability to truth, with the latter understood in a realist way. The places where this happens, notably the 'proof' of the truth rule, are notoriously shaky and murky parts of the work; but they do exist; both strands are there. That is why I said in section 1 that the subjectivist analysis of modality harmonizes as well as anything can with the rest of Descartes's work: it fits the subjectivist strand in the *Meditations*; nothing could fit both strands.

By keeping voluntarism out of that work, Descartes helped to hide from himself the split in his thought. Had he let it in, it would have virtually forced him to follow the tracks of the objector I have been answering in this section, and thus compelled him to become explicitly clear about how indubitability relates to truth. Perhaps Descartes was subliminally aware of this, that being why voluntarism does not show up in the *Meditations* or either of its cousins—the *Discourse on the Method* and the *Principles of Philosophy*.

7. 'Possible' and 'Not impossible'

The conceptualist analysis of modality, conjoined with the truism that we are as God made us, yields Descartes's theological voluntarism and satisfies the religious impulse which underlies the latter. The religious idea was that God in his greatness never confronts any rule or standard or principle that holds good independently of him, and this had to be maintained in face of the threat that even God must conform to the laws of logic. The analysis removes that threat. According to the analysis, its being impossible that P is P's relating thus and so to human minds; so God in contemplating how to act does not encounter any limiting

truths of the form 'It is impossible to bring it about that Q'. The analysis gives Descartes everything he wants in this part of his theology.

If voluntarism were powered by the idea that God can do everything, it would be committed to giving examples of extraordinary things God can do, saying for instance that God could make two plus two equal five. That would imply that two plus two could equal five, which would generalize to the conclusion that there are no impossible propositions. That would be a disaster from any point of view, and the conceptualist analysis of modality condemns it. The modal status of the proposition that two plus two equals five is secured by how this relates to our conceptual capacities, but the proposition that two plus two *could* equal five relates to those capacities in just the same way, and therefore has the same modal status. Fortunately, Descartes's actual religious concern—as distinct from the omnipotence idea which so many people wrongly attribute to him—does not push him to this disastrous extreme. Where the thought that God can do anything leads on to 'for instance he can make the sum of two and two equal five,' the thought that nothing independent of him limits him leads only to 'for instance he does not confront the impossibility that two plus two should equal five.'

How do these differ? I have credited the analysis with leading to the likes of this ('NI' for 'not impossible'):

(NI) It is not the case that God absolutely could not have made two plus two equal five,

and congratulated it on not leading to the likes of this ('P' for 'possible'):

(P) God could have made two plus two equal five.

How can this be? From something's not being impossible, does it not follow trivially that it is possible? How could any coherent theory entail NI without also entailing P? Hostile

answer: 'It couldn't! The inference of P from NI is trivially valid, and thus unblockable; a theory that purports to entail NI but not P must be incoherent. Voluntarism is in as much trouble on your reading as on any other.'

Before looking into this, let us notice what a wide swath it cuts. The problem about NI and P arises for every theory of the form:

Because Basis obtains, the modal concepts apply as they do,

where Basis is a contingent proposition. It seems all right to infer from such a theory that if Basis had not been the case, the modal concepts would not have applied as they do, so that, for instance, (NI) it would not have been impossible that two plus two equals five. Then how can we block the inference to (P) 'If Basis had not been the case, it would have been possible that two plus two equals five' and thence to 'It is possible that two plus two equals five'? If we cannot, then no theory of the type in question can be right; every such theory implies that so-called necessary truths are contingent, thereby demolishing modality rather than analyzing it. This proves a priori that the nature and applicability of our modal concepts cannot be grounded in contingent facts.

The last sentence of that paragraph casts doubt on the rest of it. In philosophy such large results do not often come so easily! Is it likely that an argument as short as that suffices to destroy, for example, all of Wittgenstein's work on modality?

The doubt is justified, because the line of thought is faulty, as I now explain. The inference which it calls trivially valid is indeed so when the modal concepts are being taken for granted as part of the working apparatus. In one special kind of context, however, we should not take them for granted, should not use them to conduct inferences that would ordinarily be valid. I refer to contexts where we are

considering what has to be the case for the modal concepts to be usable. A statement of the form 'If Basis were not the case, (NI) it would not be impossible that Q' understates something whose full strength is 'If Basis were not the case, our modal concepts would be inapplicable'; and this obviously does not entail that if Basis were not the case (P) it would be possible that Q. The inference from NI to P fails just precisely when we are exploring a theory such as Descartes's conceptualist analysis of modality.

Analogously, a theory might say what must be the case if any spatial concepts are to be applicable, thus entailing things of the form *If Basis did not obtain, nothing would have the same size as anything else*, but obviously it would not follow that *If Basis did not obtain, everything would differ in size from everything else*.

Residual discontent: 'Something funny is going on here. You are trying to talk about what would have obtained in the absence of (Basis) our de facto basis for applying modal concepts. When opponents claim to infer an absurdity from this, you reply that they are employing a conceptual apparatus which would not be usable if Basis did not obtain. Then you ought to say that nothing is then available, so that nothing can be said about what would obtain if Basis did not. So your Descartes, having spoken of our limits, ought to be silent about God's situation, not even allowing himself to say that God, lacking our limits, does not confront independently grounded impossibilities.' This, though plausible, is wrong. If we hold that our concepts apply as they do because of certain contingent facts about ourselves, we can safely infer from this that in the absence of those facts the concepts would not apply. We risk incoherence only if we say too much about what positively would be the case if those facts did not obtain.

Consider the related idea that we understand some questions the answers to which we could not understand. Apply this first to creatures other than ourselves. We might discover language-using animals, simpler than us, who have arithmetic which they use well, counting and computing up to quite high numbers. They have never yet run out of numbers—the resources seem limitless—but they are anxious about this. 'Has the number pool really no bottom?' they want to know; and it troubles them that they cannot find an answer. Knowing all about their brains and our own, we know that they lack the neural structures needed for the thought of a recursion, an endlessly repeatable operation such as going from a number to its successor. (They are capable of recursions, but not of the thought of them.) So we can see that they have a clear question the answer to which lies beyond their intellectual limits; we can tell them this, and they might understand what we say, and even believe it. That, I submit, is clearly something we might discover. So we should acknowledge that some of our questions, too, may have answers which we are profoundly, biologically incapable of grasping. We have no trouble understanding this, even though it is the possibility of our being unable to understand something; and we can even say what it is that we would not understand—namely the true answers to some of our questions. I offer this as refuting the general thesis, which I guessed might be brought against the conceptualist analysis of modality, that we cannot say anything about our own limits without transcending them.

8. Descartes's handling of these difficulties

In the passages quoted above, Descartes did not put a foot wrong. Applying his conceptualist analysis of modality to his theological problem, he said only that God does not confront

any absolute impossibilities. A passage quoted in section 2 handles the conceptualist analysis of modality with striking accuracy. Here is a shortened version of it:

I do not think we should ever say of anything that it cannot be brought about by God. I would not dare to say that God cannot make it be the case that one and two are not three. I merely say that he has given me such a mind that I cannot conceive an aggregate of one and two which is not three, and that this involves a contradiction in my conception.

Descartes does not say here that one plus two could fail to equal three; he merely refuses to assert that God could not make this be the case. He does assert that he cannot conceive of one plus two not making three, and that by his standards it is contradictory. This is exactly right when a religious concern with God's greatness is being helped by a conceptualist analysis of modality. The threatened modal limit on God is removed; but it continues to limit our powers of conception. Descartes calls it contradictory, but reminds us that this merely relates it to us and implies nothing about how it relates to God.

Equally flawless is this, written to Mersenne: '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.'¹ This makes the general claim that God can do things that are unintelligible to us; but it does not say that God can do everything, nor does it fall into the trap of saying, for some value of Q , that God could make Q obtain although we cannot conceive its doing so.

On rare occasions, however, Descartes did go wrong in that manner, as when he wrote to Mesland: 'The power

¹ First Letter to Mersenne, CSM 3:23, AT 1:146.

of God cannot have any limits. . . [This] shows us that God cannot have been determined to make it true that contradictions cannot be true together, and therefore *he could have done the opposite*.¹ The last part of this is wrong if Descartes's basis was the conceptualist analysis of modality. So this fragment of this letter counts somewhat against my interpretation and for a reading which makes voluntarism entail that everything is possible. Much more of the evidence counts in my favor, however; and we shall see shortly that another fragment of this same letter also supports a third reading of voluntarism! The letter is a hot potato.

Replying to the Sixth Objections, Descartes said something which illustrates how hard it can be to know for sure what is going on in his voluntarism. After a discourse that fits my interpretation well, Descartes continued:

There is no point in asking by what means God could have brought it about from eternity that it was not true that twice four make eight, and so on; for I declare that this is unintelligible to us.²

This is worrying. Descartes had been denying, in effect, that God encountered the necessity that twice four should make eight; and his theory about the nature of our modal concepts implies that denial. But the displayed sentence seems to suggest that God could have made it false that twice four makes eight, which makes a specific claim about what would have obtained if our modal concepts had been different. My Descartes, I repeat, was not entitled to do that, for two reasons: (i) according to him, God did not come up against modality in any way at all—he did not encounter either the impossibility *or the possibility* that twice four should equal

nine, and (ii) if we say 'God could have brought it about that twice four was not eight' we claim to make sense of something of which we cannot make sense, purporting to pull into our domain of understanding something that lies beyond its boundaries.

With those worries in mind, now look back at the sentence. It does not actually say that God could have made it false that twice four makes eight. It brushes off the question 'How could he have done this?' as pointless, for a reason having to do with unintelligibility. Furthermore, what the sentence describes as unintelligible to us is not the means whereby God could have made twice four differ from eight. Where I have 'means' Descartes had the noun *ratio*, and the 'this' which he declared to be unintelligible is referred to by the pronoun *id*; the noun is feminine, the pronoun neuter; the two cannot be linked. What he was calling unintelligible, therefore, must be twice four's being different from eight. So Descartes was dismissing the question 'How could God have done things differently?' on the grounds that we are not intellectually equipped to cope with any aspect of the 'differently'; and this fits my interpretation well. The passage continues with this: 'It would have been easy for God to ordain certain things such that we men cannot understand the possibility of their being otherwise than they are.' This innocently quantifies over the 'certain things', not purporting to state any of them.

Still, perhaps not all is well. One naturally hears that last bit as meaning 'It would have been easy for God to ordain certain things—such as twice four's not being eight—which men cannot understand. . . ; and that involves hearing the

¹ Letter to Mesland, CSM 3:235, AT 4:118; emphasis added.

² Replies to Sixth Objections, CSM 2:294, AT 7:436. I replace CSM's 'there is no need to ask' by 'there is no point in asking', and CSM's 'I admit' by 'I declare'. Each change is well supported by the Latin (for the former, consult 'opus est' in Lewis and Short, not in the Oxford Latin Dictionary), and each fits its context better.

passage as implying something to which Descartes, on my account of his views, was not entitled.

A little later in the same paragraph, he continued: '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.' The affirmation after the semicolon fits my story, but the preceding denial does not, because my Descartes did hold that eternal truths depend in a certain way on the human intellect. This, however, does not seriously embarrass my interpretation. Descartes was responding to his anonymous critics who, in the Sixth Objections, had picked on something in his Replies to the Fifth Objections and had written:

How can the truths of geometry or metaphysics. . . be immutable and eternal and yet not be independent of God? How could he have made it untrue from eternity that twice four makes eight, or that a triangle has three angles? Either these truths depend solely on the intellect while it is thinking of them, or on existing things, or else they are independent, since it seems that God could not have brought it about that any of these essences or truths were not from eternity.¹

The issue concerns the eternity of the truths in question. The critics are saying that one must choose: either (a) relinquish the idea that they are eternal, and say that they hold only for as long as someone thinks them or that in some other way they are at the mercy of contingent things, or (b) stick to the view that they are eternal, in which case you must say that they are independent of God because even he could not give something a certain status for all eternity. The

options grouped together in (a) are taken to be outright denials of the eternity of the truths; this is rammed home by 'depend solely on the intellect while [*dum*] it is thinking of them', which CSM mistranslates as 'depend solely on the intellect that is thinking of them'. Descartes in his reply needed only to deny that eternal truths depend *in that way* on anyone's thinking of them—a way that would give them no more durable backer than the individual thinker (whom he assumed to be human, though his critics had not said so). That let him choose the other option—the truths are eternal—and to assert bluntly that God could indeed make them so from all eternity. Nothing in that conflicts with the conceptualist analysis of modality. The statement 'Eternal truths [do not] depend on the human intellect' conflicts with the analysis, but what Descartes needed to say does not—nor, I suggest, does what he meant. (I shall return to the eternity of necessary truths in section 11.)

Still, there are lapses, of which I have cited one and a possible second. They are few and minor, however, and it is impressive how seldom Descartes implies that everything is possible, and how often his theological statements of voluntarism are faithful to the analysis of modality that I attribute to him.

Curley, alone among previous writers on these matters, has noticed how seldom Descartes took his voluntarism to entail that God could have made twice four not equal eight. Perhaps Descartes meant to say (Curley suggests) not that God could have made necessary truths false but only that he could have made them contingent.² The only direct support for this occurs in the 'hot potato' letter to Mesland from which I quoted early in this section. Descartes alludes there

¹ Sixth Objections, CSM 2:281, AT 7:417f. In the final phrase, the Latin means simply 'were not', presumably in the sense of 'did not exist or obtain.' CSM's 'were not as they were' cannot be right.

² Curley, 'Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths'.

to 'things which God could have made possible, but which he has nevertheless wished to make impossible'. This text is Curley's prime exhibit, just as the passage about two 'sorts of possibility' in the Replies to Second Objections is mine.

The position that Curley attributes to Descartes has a kind of coherence: there are, as Curley points out, workable systems of logic which allow for a proposition to be possibly possible but not actually so. Whether Descartes's overall philosophy would be much helped by his taking this option is not clear, however, and Curley himself seems unsure about it. Comparing the doctrine that he attributes to Descartes with the thesis that all propositions are possible, Curley says that his interpretation 'avoids the horrendous systematic consequences' of the latter;¹ but a page earlier he says that his is 'not much better' than the other; and he concedes that even the position he attributes to Descartes must not be applied to propositions about God's own nature and existence.

Those concessions make Curley's reading less inviting than mine, I suggest. Its textual basis is also thinner. In the paragraph where Descartes wrote about 'things which God could have made possible' he also wrote—alas!—that God 'could have done the opposite', thereby implying that the truth value and not merely the modal status of the seemingly necessary proposition could have been different. Anyway, voluntarism on Curley's account of it does not minister to Descartes's theological concerns. According to Curley's Descartes, God could make it be only contingently false that two plus two equals five, but he could not make it true; for if he could make it true then it is possible, and by parity of reasoning so is every proposition, which is the 'horrendous' result that Curley rightly wants to avoid. This is puzzling.

¹ Ibid., 593.

² Loeb, *From Descartes to Hume*, 68.

Making it possible for two plus two to equal five looks hard, but making a possible proposition true seems easy for a god. Curley's Descartes holds that God can perform the hard task but not the easy one. This sounds like untenable theology, whether one thinks of God as omnipotent (as Curley's Descartes thinks of him) or merely as unlimited by anything independent of him (as mine does).

9. Essences

In one place Descartes speaks of God as decreeing that 'the essences of things, and the mathematical truths which we can know concerning them' shall be eternal and immutable.² I shall come to eternity soon, but first let us think about essences. Descartes ordinarily takes essences to be the ground or source of necessary truths, and one wonders how that relates to voluntarism. At first glance it seems to fit in smoothly: God creates necessary truths by creating the essences from which they flow. Loeb understands the situation in that way: he writes of Descartes's 'peculiar doctrine that the eternal truths are dependent on God-willed essences', implying that voluntarism speaks of the creation of essences from which necessary truths somehow arise. If that were Descartes's view of it, though, he would be faced with a nasty question: For God to make it false that twice four is eight, would he have to give a different essence to one of those numbers? If Descartes answered yes, conceding that God could not make twice four not be eight while leaving those essences intact, he would gravely offend against the spirit of voluntarism. If on the other hand he answered no, allowing that God could falsify an arithmetical truth either by altering an essence or in some other way, that would cast an eerie light on the claim that God does in fact settle modal

truths by creating essences. What reason could there be for this? What point in believing it? Indeed, what could it mean?

The former option is intolerable, the latter unattractive; so Descartes needs to stop the question from arising. He could do that by maintaining that 'essence' does no work of its own in the context of voluntarism, so that 'changing the essences' and 'changing the necessary truths' would merely be two names for a single act. The doctrine that essences are a ground for or source of necessary truths, he should say, though all right in its way and at its level, cannot be sustained when we are on the metaphysical ground floor where voluntarism comes into play.

That best option is the one that Descartes actually took. The term 'essence' seldom occurs in the voluntarism texts. When it does, Descartes is responding to a critic who has used it, and his reply does not put the term to work in a doctrinal way. For example, he never says in these contexts that eternal truths depend on, or are grounded in, essences. The only voluntarism text where essences are mentioned more than passingly is in a letter to Mersenne, where Descartes equates God's role as 'the author of the essence of created things' with his 'establishing the eternal truths', on the grounds that 'this essence is nothing other than the eternal truths'.¹

10. Innateness

In the first letter to Mersenne, Descartes said that mathematical truths 'have been laid down by God' and, a little further on, that they 'are all inborn in our minds'. Jolley

infers from this that 'Descartes saw a connection between innate ideas and the creation of the eternal truths'.² Did he? In the letter a brief sketch of voluntarism is followed by the statement that necessary truths are knowable by us because God has imprinted them on us; but it looks to me as though Descartes is here moving on from one topic to the next, from voluntarism to modal epistemology. I cannot see these two themes in the letter as organically connected, nor can I see why Jolley thinks they are.

Loeb flatly denies that the second topic—the epistemic use of innateness—has any place anywhere in Descartes's thought. He writes: 'Descartes would have had no use for innate ideas were it not for his [voluntarism].'³ The negative part of this ignores the many texts in which Descartes connects innateness with knowability in quite Leibnizian ways, with voluntarism being nowhere in sight. (Some were written before Descartes first announced voluntarism, and presumably before he had thought of it.) I am mainly concerned, however, with the positive claim that voluntarism could motivate a doctrine of innate ideas or knowledge.

The claim is right, of course. According to voluntarism as I understand it, for P to be necessary is for P to relate thus and so to our intellectual limits; and those limits are innate, in that God gave them to us as part of our human birthright. This humdrum tie between voluntarism and innateness, though solid enough, does not help us with any of the passages where Descartes discusses innateness for its own sake. While insisting that all these passages should be

¹ Third Letter to Mersenne, CSM 3:25, AT 1:151f.

² Jolley, *The Light of the Soul*, 51. This is Descartes's 'first known reference to innate ideas', Jolley writes in an uncharacteristic lapse. The letter does not mention innate ideas: what it calls innate are laws and truths, and Descartes spoke of those as innate several years earlier. I should add that Jolley's reading of voluntarism, though also influenced by Margaret Wilson, differs from mine in a couple of respects.

³ Loeb, *From Descartes to Hume*, 68. From this Loeb infers that Descartes's innatism is differently motivated from Leibniz's—which is one of his reasons for denying that the so-called 'rationalists' form a bloc.

seen in the light of voluntarism, Loeb gives no reason why any of them should be.

11. The eternity of necessary truths

Necessary truths, according to our ordinary notion of them, are eternally necessary; so Descartes had reason to want his analysis to imply that they are so. Indeed, he sometimes used 'eternal truths' as a mere label for them; he never called them 'necessary.' He did once refer to 'the mathematical truths that you [Mersenne] call eternal'; but if he meant to suggest that perhaps they are not eternal, it is the only time that he did so.

Their eternity creates a problem for Descartes on any of the more usual readings of his voluntarism.¹ It may also seem to threaten my reading: if the necessity that twice two should make four is ultimately a contingent fact about our capacities, then might we not someday find that this arithmetical truth has turned false on us? We wake up one morning to find that we have two noses, rectangular fingers, a hatred for sugar and. . . minds such that twice two no longer makes four.

This version of the problem can be solved, however, though I doubt if Descartes saw how. The prospect with which we are threatened is no threat at all, because facing it means entertaining the thought of four's not being twice two, and we cannot do that. This belongs to the general point discussed in section 7: our conceptual limits could have been different, but we cannot have a specific thought about any such difference. That applies to the past as well as to the future. Descartes's analysis does not entitle us to say: 'Though it is necessary (for us) *now* that twice two is four, there may have been—or there may someday be—a time when it was not or will not be.' Anything we say or think

now about the modal status that a proposition had or does or will have, or would have if. . . , must be determined by our actual present intellectual limits. So Descartes's analysis secures the eternity of necessary truths.

Objection: 'No! On your account, the analysis implies that we must think of necessary truths as eternally true, but not that they really are so.' This, like an earlier objection, rejects the conceptualist analysis of modality: it purports to make sense of something which the analysis declares to be senseless. We are not discussing the truth of the analysis, but rather its powers. We were asking whether it can secure the eternity of necessary truths, and the right answer is: Yes, it can do so, according to its understanding of what it is for a proposition to be eternally true.

That, however, does not put the eternity matter to rest. Granted that the analysis will not let us think of a change in the modal value of any particular proposition, it does allow us the general thought that some day the distribution of modalities across propositions may change. If it did not allow that thought, it would imply that the analysis itself is unthinkable. Now, even that general thought seems to threaten the eternity of necessary truths, and may well be found troubling—especially by one who values tranquility as much as Descartes did.

This worry might be allayed in a Kantian manner, by arguing that mental identity depends on how our thoughts hook into one another along the time line, so that no thinker could survive a conceptual change of the threatened kind. However, one would not expect that from Descartes, who helped himself to the notion of continuant thinkers without considering what it takes for such a thing to last through time. Lacking Kantian solace, he dealt with the eternity

¹ For some discussion of the difficulties, see Curley, 'Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths', 576ff.

problem differently: 'I do not think that mathematical truths... are independent of God', he wrote. 'Nevertheless I do think that they are immutable and eternal, since the will and decree of God willed and decreed that they should be so.'¹ This gives to the eternity of necessary truths a theological basis—an imperfect treatment of the topic, but not bad in a way that makes it count against my reading of voluntarism as based on a conceptualist analysis of modality.

In the remark last quoted, by the way, 'immutable' does not mean 'unchangeable' but only 'unchanging'. This is standard for Descartes, who elsewhere equates 'God is immutable' with 'God acts always in the same way', and who conducts this inference: 'Since they are always the same, it is right to call them immutable and eternal.'²

12. Eternity and the Meditations

Some philosophers have seen the eternity or at least the durability of necessary truths as central to a famous problem that arises out of Descartes's treatment of skepticism in the *Meditations*. He propounds a 'truth rule' according to which anything that I perceive distinctly (while finding it indubitable) is true; then later he appeals to God's benevolence as a guarantor against some disaster in the life of the mind. Here is the problem: If we securely have the truth rule, what further intellectual benefit can we get from the assurance of God's wishing us well? Two wrong answers to this have had some currency. One says that God's benevolence secures us against failures of memory and thus against wrong beliefs

of the form 'I did distinctly perceive that P'. Nobody now understands Descartes in this way; nothing in the texts gives it any support. The other wrong answer connects with voluntarism, and I shall discuss it. It has turned up at intervals down the years, never gaining ascendancy but never quite dying out either. I shall call it 'the Bréhier view'.³

According to it, the truth rule serves at a given time to establish the truth of P at that time, and God's existence and nature assure us that P will continue to be true thereafter. 'The only problem is to know how I can foresee with certainty that... what is intuited will continue to be true.'⁴ Most of the propositions that we are initially assured of by the truth rule are necessary truths; so the Bréhier view of God's role requires that even necessary truths be prima facie unstable, variable, shifty; and voluntarism seems to satisfy that requirement. In a nutshell: God chooses to make twice two equal four, and his goodness towards us assures us that once he has done that he will never undo it. That was indeed Descartes's view of the matter; but does it inform the *Meditations*?

Nothing in that work points unequivocally to the Bréhier view. When Descartes there makes use of 'was'/'is' and 'then'/'later', he is contrasting an inability at one time to doubt P with a later ability to doubt it, not contrasting P's truth at one time with its falsehood later. Consider also the terms in which Descartes announces that the truth rule needs help from theology:

¹ Replies to Fifth Objections, CSM 2:261, AT 7:380.

² *The World* 7, CSM 1:96, AT 11:43; Replies to Fifth Objections, CSM 2: 262, AT 7:381.

³ It is propounded in Émile Bréhier, 'The Creation of the Eternal Truths in Descartes's System' (1937), reprinted in *Descartes: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Willis Doney (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 192–208; Norman Kemp Smith, *New Studies in the Philosophy of Descartes* (London: Macmillan, 1952), 188, 273ff; and John Etchemendy, 'The Cartesian Circle: *Circulus ex tempore*', *Studia Cartesiana* 2 (1981): 5–42. It is also hinted at in Wilson, *Descartes*, 128.

⁴ Bréhier, 'The Creation of the Eternal Truths in Descartes's System', 201.

'My nature is such that so long as I perceive something very clearly and distinctly I cannot but believe it to be true. But my nature is also such that I cannot fix my mental vision continually on the same thing, so as to keep perceiving it clearly; and often the memory of a previously made judgment may come back, when I am no longer attending to the arguments that led me to make it. And so other arguments can now occur to me which might easily undermine my opinion, if I did not possess knowledge of God.'¹

This counts decisively against the Bréhier view. If Descartes's concern were that a once true proposition might have become false, his repeated emphasis on 'my nature' would be pointless, as would his highlighted contrast between two different intellectual states that I may be in. He goes on to introduce the thought that 'there have been frequent cases

where I have regarded things as true and certain, but have later been led by other arguments to judge them to be false'. This creates the worry which a belief in a veracious God will supposedly vanquish; and it is, clearly and explicitly, the thought that on the past occasion I was wrong, that is, that the proposition in question was false. The Bréhier view is a nonstarter.

Voluntarism casts no useful light on those aspects of the *Meditations* that have received most attention: the truth rule, divine veracity, the relation between those, the Cartesian circle. The real connection between the two is the one indicated in section 6 above: voluntarism and the treatment of skepticism in the *Meditations* are both shaped by a subjectivist tendency in Descartes's thinking—a willingness to understand concepts such as those of truth and necessity in terms of what they mean to us, how they figure in our lives.²

¹ Fifth Meditation, CSM 2:48, AT 7:69; see also *Principles* 1:13, CSM 1: 197, AT 8a:9f.

² Comments by Margaret Wilson and by two referees for the *Philosophical Review* have enabled me to improve this paper considerably. I am grateful.