

## ARTICLE

# DIVINE SIMPLICITY AND THE ETERNAL TRUTHS IN DESCARTES\*

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Descartes held the seemingly bizarre doctrine that the eternal truths are freely created by God. Although much has been written in recent decades on Descartes's doctrine of the creation of the eternal truths (henceforth, the 'Creation Doctrine'), scholarly attention has been rather narrowly focused on a small number of issues concerning this.<sup>1</sup> Despite the important work being done on those issues, this focus has had an unfortunate, and presumably unintended, consequence: it has taken much-needed attention away from other equally important issues concerning the Creation Doctrine. In particular, Descartes's *reasons* for holding the Creation Doctrine have been largely ignored.<sup>2</sup> This is especially perplexing considering how often it is asked *why* Descartes (or anybody, for that matter) would hold such a

\* In this paper, I employ the following abbreviations:

- AT Descartes, René. 1996. *Oeuvres de Descartes*, ed. by C. Adam and P. Tannery. Paris: J Vrin (cited by volume and page number).
- CSM Descartes, René. 1985. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vols. I & II, ed. by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (cited by volume and page number).
- CSMK Descartes, René. 1991. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. III, ed. by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch, A. Kenny. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (cited by page number).

(In some cases, my translation of AT differs from CSM or CSMK.)

- DM Suarez, Francisco. 1861. *Disputationes Metaphysicae*. In *Opera Omnia*. Paris: Vives (cited by disputation, section, and paragraph number)
- SCG Thomas Aquinas. 1975. *Summa Contra Gentiles*, trans. by A. Pegis. Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press.
- ST Thomas Aquinas. 1964–1981. *Summa Theologiae*. Cambridge: Blackfriars.

<sup>1</sup> See Alanen (1985), (1988), Bennett (1994), Cronin (1960), (1966), Curley (1984, 1998), Frankfurt (1977), Ishiguro (1986), Kaufman (2002), LaCroix (1984), Normore (1991), Petrik (1998), Van Cleve (1994), Van Den Brink (1993), Wells (1961, 1982). These studies can be roughly divided into two general types: (a) Those dealing with the Creation Doctrine's consequences for necessity and possibility, and (b) those attempting to locate the historical source(s) of the position which Descartes opposes.

<sup>2</sup> Frankfurt (1977) and Curley (1984) make some attempt to investigate Descartes's reasons for the Creation Doctrine.

doctrine. In this paper, I attempt to begin to remedy this unfortunate situation.

In the 27 May 1630 letter to Mersenne (AT I 151–3; CSMK 25), after a brief statement of the Creation Doctrine, Descartes presents two reasons for it: (a) Consideration of divine freedom requires that God's will be wholly undetermined by anything independently true or good; (b) The Doctrine of Divine Simplicity (DDS). In this paper, I will concern myself only with the latter reason.

Stated in its simplest form, DDS is the thesis that God is absolutely simple, i.e. there are no parts and no composition in God, nor does God's essence differ from his existence. Descartes inherits DDS from a long line of philosophical and theological predecessors, including Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas; and his account does not differ dramatically from their accounts, although the consequences Descartes deduces from DDS differ greatly from those of his predecessors. In fact, I believe that Descartes takes DDS seriously enough to deduce exactly what *honestly* ought to be deduced from it. That is, Descartes is willing to 'bite the bullet' and accept the consequences of holding DDS, no matter how *prima-facie* peculiar they are. One of these *prima-facie* peculiar consequences is the Creation Doctrine.

In this paper, I examine Descartes's version of DDS both for its own sake and as a reason for the Creation Doctrine. In the first part, I will examine Descartes's motivations for holding DDS. I begin by comparing Descartes's motivations with those of Saint Thomas Aquinas. I do this for two reasons: first, Aquinas's account of DDS is *the* classic statement of the doctrine, so it will provide some helpful background to the issue. Second, Descartes's reasons for holding DDS form a subset of Aquinas's reasons. In the second part, I examine Descartes's theory of distinctions. A good understanding of Descartes's theory of distinctions is necessary for understanding his version of DDS; we must know how things can be distinct in order to know how something (i.e. God) can be simple. In the third part, I give an account of Descartes's version of DDS. The account I give may initially strike some readers as contentious, some as obviously false, because it is commonly thought that Descartes introduces a radical and strict version of DDS, such that there are not even conceptual distinctions in God. I will argue that the evidence simply does not support such a radical version of DDS; in fact, the evidence supports attributing a rather tame version of DDS to Descartes. Nevertheless, as I will show in the final part, this tame version of DDS is still sufficient to entail that the eternal truths are created by God.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Strictly speaking, DDS will entail that the eternal truths are created by God but not necessarily that the eternal truths are freely created by God. The latter claim is the Creation Doctrine. So, strictly speaking, DDS will not entail the Creation Doctrine. However, DDS plus the fact that God's will is free entails the Creation Doctrine.

A preliminary is required. Descartes holds what I'll call 'the Dependence Thesis', i.e. that all things, including the eternal truths, depend on God.<sup>4</sup> Descartes cannot accept any position concerning the relationship between God and the eternal truths that would violate the Dependence Thesis.<sup>5</sup> However, as Edwin Curley has rightly noticed, the Creation Doctrine and positions that violate the Dependence Thesis do not seem to exhaust the alternatives available.<sup>6</sup> That is, from the fact that Descartes cannot accept any position that violates the Dependence Thesis, we cannot therefore conclude that Descartes is committed to the Creation Doctrine. In fact, most philosophers and theologians in Descartes's time and earlier held the Dependence Thesis but did not hold the Creation Doctrine. This 'moderate alternative' position holds that the eternal truths depend on God, but not on his will; rather, they depend on God's intellect or understanding. The moderate alternative was so widely held that Leibniz states that 'the eternal truths, which *until the time of Descartes* had been named an object of the divine understanding, suddenly became an object of the will'.<sup>7</sup> So, in order to understand why Descartes feels committed to the Creation Doctrine despite the availability of the moderate alternative, we must understand why he cannot accept the moderate alternative. Consideration of DDS will provide such an explanation.

## REASONS FOR DDS

### Aquinas

Descartes's reasons for holding DDS will become clearer upon consideration of a classic statement of DDS and its motivations. The classic statement is found in Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae* Ia 3.7 and *Summa Contra Gentiles* I.18. Although Augustine (in *De Civitate Dei* XI.10), Anselm (in *Proslogion* XVIII and *Monologion* XVI and XVII), and others prior to Aquinas present DDS, Aquinas's statement of DDS seems to me to be the most fully developed account of it amongst Descartes's predecessors.

In the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas presents his main argument that God must be simple because he cannot satisfy the conditions for being composite. There are several ways in which something may be composite according to Aquinas:

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, AT I 145; CSMK 23, AT I 149–50; CSMK 24–5, AT VII 380; CSM II 261, AT VII 435–6; CSM II 293–4, AT V 160; CSMK 343.

<sup>5</sup> Two famous examples of positions that violate the Dependence Thesis are the positions of Duns Scotus and Francisco Suarez. It should be noted that the attribution of Dependence-Thesis-violating positions to Scotus and Suarez is extremely controversial. See Alanen and Knuuttilla (1988), Knuuttilla (1993), Wells (1981).

<sup>6</sup> Curley (1984) p. 583.

<sup>7</sup> (1985) §186.

For any x, x is composite if

- (a) x has extended parts, i.e. x is a body (ST Ia 3.1),
- or (b) x consists of form and matter (ST Ia 3.2),
- or (c) x differs from x's nature (ST Ia 3.3),
- or (d) x's essence differs from x's existence (ST Ia 3.4)
- or (e) there is a difference between x's genus and differentia (ST Ia 3.5)
- or (f) x consists of substance and accidents (ST Ia 3.6)<sup>8</sup>

Without going into the details of Aquinas's position, it is sufficient to note that he argues that God cannot satisfy any of (a) through (f).<sup>9</sup> We may present Aquinas's initial reasoning as follows:

- 1 For any x, x is composite if x satisfies (a) or (b) or (c) ... or (f).
- 2 God does not satisfy (a) or (b) or (c) ... or (f).
- 3 Therefore, God is not composite.

And with the additional premise:

- 4 For any x, if x is not composite, then x is simple  
(ST Ia 3.7, *res*)

we arrive at Aquinas's conclusion:

- 5 Therefore, God is simple.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to this reasoning, Aquinas provides several other reasons in favor of DDS. In the interests of brevity and relevance, I present only three of them:

*Reason 1:* God's aseity requires that he be absolutely independent of everything non-identical with himself (i.e. nothing else is required for God to exist), and everything non-identical to God be dependent on him (i.e. everything besides God requires him for their existence). But Aquinas thinks that the following principle is true:

<sup>8</sup> See Hughes (1989) pp. 3–10.

<sup>9</sup> Aquinas's arguments against God's satisfying any of (a)–(f) are found in ST Ia 3. For an excellent discussion of Aquinas on this point, see Hughes (1989) ch. 1.

<sup>10</sup> ST Ia 3.7 *res*:

For God, we said, is not composed of extended parts, since he is not a body; nor of form and matter; nor does he differ from his own nature; nor his nature from his existence; nor can one distinguish in him genus and difference; nor substance and accidents. It is clear then that there is no way in which God is composite, and he must be altogether simple.

S1: A composite is dependent on, or posterior to, its parts.

(ST Ia 3.7.res)<sup>11</sup>

A brief word on S1 is in order. As Christopher Hughes notes, Aquinas employed several different, non-equivalent senses of *dependence* and the closely related concept of *priority*.<sup>12</sup> However, it seems to me that the notion of priority employed by Aquinas in the present argument against divine composition is what Hughes calls ‘ontological priority’. We may define it as follows:

$x$  is ontologically prior to  $y =_{df}$  It is impossible for  $y$  to exist without  $x$  but it is possible for  $x$  to exist without  $y$ .

Ontological priority is closely related to ontological *dependence* in the following manner:

$x$  is ontologically dependent on  $y$  iff  $y$  is ontologically prior to  $x$ .

Moreover, Aquinas argues for the following:

S2: If some thing  $C$  is composed of parts  $p_1, p_2, p_3, \dots, p_n$ , then  $C \neq p_1, C \neq p_2, C \neq p_3, \dots, C \neq p_n$ .

(ST Ia 3.7.res)

If S1 and S2 are true, then God cannot be composite because he would then be ontologically dependent on something non-identical with himself. Because it is metaphysically impossible for God to depend on anything non-identical with himself, he not only is not composite, he *cannot* be

<sup>11</sup> As early as 1252–56, Aquinas presented the argument based on the dependence of composites on their parts, in his *Scriptum Super Libros Sententiarum* I.8.iv:

Every composite is posterior to its components: since the simpler exists *in se* before anything is added to it for the composition of a third. But nothing is prior to the first. Therefore, since God is the first principle, he is not composite.

<sup>12</sup> Hughes distinguishes ‘ontological priority’, ‘existential priority’, ‘causal priority’, and ‘mereological priority’ (1989, pp. 30–33). He states that

if the argument from the posteriority of composita to divine incompositum is to succeed, there must be a way of being posterior to one’s parts such that (i) every composite being is posterior to its parts in that way; and (ii) God could not be posterior to His parts in that way.

(p. 34)

Hughes argues that there is not a single sense of posteriority which can serve in both (i) and (ii). His argument is persuasive. This does not affect the present discussion, however, because I am not interested in critically evaluating Aquinas’s arguments here.

composite.<sup>13</sup> As Aquinas states, ‘Every composite, moreover, is subsequent to its components. The first being, therefore, which is God, has no components’ (SCG I 18). Therefore, God is simple.<sup>14</sup>

*Reason 2:* Aquinas thinks that if some thing C is a composite of parts  $p_1, p_2, p_3, \dots p_n$  then there is a cause which is responsible for  $p_1, p_2, p_3, \dots p_n$  composing C. That is to say, a plurality will be and remain a plurality unless caused by something else to form a composite. So, if God is composite, then there is a cause of his composition. However, God, as the first cause, is essentially uncaused. Therefore, he is not composite.<sup>15</sup> And, by (4), he is simple.

*Reason 3:* Every composite is potentially dissoluble or separable. But it is absurd to suppose that God can be separated into constituent parts. As Aquinas states:

Every composite, furthermore, is potentially dissoluble. This arises from the nature of composition . . . Now, what is dissoluble can fail to be [*est potentia ad non esse*]. This is not appropriate [*non competit*] to God, since he is *per se* the necessary being. There is, therefore, no composition in God.

(SCG I 18)<sup>16</sup>

Aquinas seems to be implicitly employing S2 here. He thinks that it belongs to the nature of a composite to be potentially dissoluble.<sup>17</sup> But if God is

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Adams (1987) p. 905, and Morris (1985) p. 101.

<sup>14</sup> Similar reasoning is found in Anselm’s *Monologion* 17:

A composite requires, for its existence, its components and owes its being what it is to them. It is what it is through them. They, however, are not what they are through it. A composite, therefore, just is not supreme. If, then, the supreme nature is a composite of many goods, what belongs to a composite necessarily belongs to it also. But truth’s whole and already manifest necessity destroys and overthrows by clear reason this falsehood’s blasphemy.

(Cf. Adams, 1987, pp. 904–5)

<sup>15</sup> SCG I 18:

Every composition, likewise, needs some composer. For, if there is composition, it is made up of a plurality, and a plurality cannot be fitted into a unity except by some composer. If, then, God were composite, he would have a composer. He could not compose himself, since nothing is its own cause, because it would be prior to itself, which is impossible. Now, the composer is the efficient cause of the composite. Thus, God would have an efficient cause. Thus, too, he would not be the first cause – which was proved above.

(Cf. Adams, 1987, p. 905 and Aquinas, *De Potentia* 7.1)

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Anselm: ‘every composite thing of necessity can be actually or conceptually divided into parts’ (*On the Incarnation of the Word* V, in Anselm, 1998).

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Hughes (1989) pp. 37–8.

composite, he is dissoluble; that is, if God is a composite  $C$ , composed of parts  $p_1, p_2, p_3, \dots p_n$ , then  $C$  can be separated into its constituent parts  $p_1, p_2, p_3, \dots p_n$ . But, according to S2, none of the parts *are* God; so, if he is separable into parts that are not him, then he can fail to exist, even if the parts exist. But God necessarily exists. Therefore, God cannot fail to exist; hence, he cannot be composite, if S2 is true.

Each of these reasons, as well as the others I have omitted, is sufficient, according to Aquinas, to show that God is not composite; hence he is simple.<sup>18</sup>

### Descartes

Although it is clear from many texts that Descartes held a version of DDS, the reasons *why* he held it are not as explicitly and systematically stated as are Aquinas's. However, Descartes does present some reasons for holding DDS, and, perhaps not surprisingly, they are those that Aquinas provides.<sup>19</sup>

Descartes presents a reason for DDS not interestingly different from Aquinas's *Reason 1*. For instance, in the *Discourse on Method*, Descartes states:

And as I observed that *all composition is evidence of dependence* and that dependence is manifestly a defect, I concluded that it could not be a perfection in God to be composed of two natures and consequently that he was not composed of them.

(AT VI 35; CSM I 128–9, emphasis mine)

Although Descartes does not explicitly state that a composite is dependent on its parts in the manner stated by Aquinas, he does tell us that it belongs to the nature of a composite to be dependent, either on its parts or on an efficient cause.<sup>20</sup> In the case of the former, he is explicitly stating Aquinas's *Reason 1*. In the case of the latter, then he is stating something similar to

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Adams (1987) p. 905.

<sup>19</sup> It is beyond question that Descartes was familiar with Aquinas. In fact, Descartes claims to have taken some Aquinas with him on his travels (although, as Daniel Garber has noticed, the French is ambiguous (*une Somme de S. Thomas*) and could be read as 'one of Saint Thomas' *Summas*' or as 'a summary of Saint Thomas'). Garber (1987). See AT II 630; CSMK 142 and Normore (1986).

It should be noted that there is at least one very noticeable difference between Aquinas and Descartes on DDS. Aquinas believes that God is immutable *because* he is simple: 'Things that change are always composite. Now it has been shown that in God there is no composition, but he is altogether simple. [Therefore] it is manifest that God cannot change' (ST Ia 9.1). However, Descartes believes that God is simple *because* he is immutable. See *Principles* I 56 (AT VIII A 26; CSM I 211).

<sup>20</sup> See AT VI 35–6; CSM I 128–9, AT VII 185; CSM II 130.

Aquinas's *Reason 2*: All composites are *causally* dependent on something else. But God cannot be dependent either on parts or on an efficient cause distinct from himself.<sup>21</sup>

In many texts Descartes presents a reason for DDS no different from Aquinas's *Reason 3*: Composites are dissoluble or separable. For instance, in a passage from the Second Replies, which may remind us as much of Anselm as of Aquinas, Descartes states:

The very nature of a body involves many imperfections, such as its *divisibility into parts*, the fact that each of its parts is different and so on; for it is self-evident that it is a greater perfection to be undivided than to be divided, and so on.

(AT VII 138; CSM II 99, emphasis mine)

Descartes reiterates this type of thinking in *Principles* I 23, where he states:

There are many things such that, although we recognize some perfection in them, we also find in them some imperfection or limitation, and these therefore cannot belong to God. For example, the nature of body includes *divisibility* along with extension in space, and since *it is an imperfection to be divisible*, it is certain that God is not a body.

(AT VIII A 13; CSM I 200–1, emphasis mine)

Although these passages claim that God is not *a body* because bodies are divisible, we can easily see that the same will hold for other composites. That is, God cannot be a composite because composites are divisible; and Descartes believes that 'the *inseparability* of all the attributes of God is one of the most important perfections which I understand him to have' (AT VII 50; CSM II 34, emphasis mine).

## KINDS OF DISTINCTIONS IN DESCARTES

It is well-established that Descartes was heavily influenced by his education by the Jesuit scholastics at La Flèche, particularly with respect to his metaphysics and philosophical theology.<sup>22</sup> This influence is apparent in his discussion of the different types of distinctions.<sup>23</sup> Although Descartes follows the scholastic tradition (largely via Suarez) in holding that there are three

<sup>21</sup> See AT VII 78–80, 235–7; CSM II 54–5, 164–6.

<sup>22</sup> See, for instance, Alanen (1985) and (1986), Gilson (1913), Normore (1986), Wells (1961), (1965), (1982). For the curriculum at La Flèche, see Rochemonteix (1889) and Garber (1992).

<sup>23</sup> Theories of distinctions were employed in the Middle Ages primarily to address issues such as universals and the Trinity. However, many employed distinctions to address the issue of a simple God's attributes. See Adams (1987).

types of distinction, he, as usual, puts his own spin on things.<sup>24</sup> Descartes holds, as did his predecessors, that the three types of distinction are *real*, of *reason* [*rationis*] or *conceptual*, and an intermediate distinction, which Descartes calls a ‘modal’ distinction.<sup>25</sup>

The following is not intended to be an exhaustive account of Descartes’s theory of distinctions; that is well-beyond the scope of this project. I simply wish to give enough details about the theory to enable us to address the issue of DDS.

### The Real Distinction (*distinctio realis*)

Although the most famous application and discussion of the real distinction in Descartes is found in the argument for mind–body distinctness in the Sixth Meditation, Descartes presents his most fully-developed account of the real distinction in *Principles* I 60. He begins by explaining which kinds of things are really distinct:

Strictly speaking, a *real distinction* exists only between two or more substances; and we can perceive that two substances are really distinct simply from the fact that we can clearly and distinctly understand [*intelligere*] one apart from the other.

(AT VIII A 28; CSM I 213)

As with all of Descartes’s characterizations of distinctions, he provides a ‘metaphysical’ characterization and an ‘epistemological guide’ to the distinctions via clear and distinct perception (or, in some cases, the *lack* of clear and distinct perception).<sup>26</sup> On the metaphysical side, we have

RD1: There is a *real distinction* between x and y iff x and y are different substances.

RD1 is not particularly informative because it does not provide a deep analysis of the real distinction; it merely tells us which type of things are really distinct. Moreover, RD1 is not helpful unless we know what Descartes means by ‘substance’. Fortunately, Descartes tells us that ‘by substance we can understand nothing other than a thing which exists in such a way as to depend on no other thing for its existence’ (AT VIII A 24; CSM

<sup>24</sup> See Alanen (1986) p. 223–4.

<sup>25</sup> See Alanen (1986), p. 226, Cross (1999), Wells (1965), and Wolter (1990) ch. 1. Duns Scotus’s ‘formal distinction’ and Henry of Ghent’s ‘intentional distinction’ are perhaps the most famous examples of the intermediate distinction. See Wolter (1990) and Adams (1987).

<sup>26</sup> For instance, in the discussion of the distinctions in *Principles* I, Descartes states ‘we can perceive that . . . The first kind of modal distinction can be recognized . . . [and] The second kind of modal distinction is recognized . . .’ (AT VII A I 28–9; CSM I 213–4).

I 210).<sup>27</sup> Spinoza would later famously exploit this Cartesian notion of substance to arrive at his substance monism. Descartes immediately recognizes such a worry; after all, this definition of ‘substance’ would entail that there is only one substance, namely God.<sup>28</sup> But Descartes allows a looser sense of ‘substance’ in which there can be finite, created substances.<sup>29</sup> A created substance is one which does not depend on anything other than God. Descartes contrasts substances with modes or accidents and attributes, each of which depends on something besides God, namely the substance that ‘has’ them. Though substances have a causal dependence on God, they are independent of modes or accidents. Modes, on the other hand, are not only causally dependent on God, they are also ‘substantially dependent’ in that they depend on the substance which has them, although the substance does not *cause* them.<sup>30</sup>

The manner by which we know that x is really distinct from y is through clear and distinct perception of x apart from y and vice versa, according to Descartes. The fact that we can clearly and distinctly perceive x and y apart from each other entails, via the Second Meditation ‘truth rule’ (i.e. whatever I clearly and distinctly perceive is true), that x and y can exist apart from each other. This is raised explicitly in the Sixth Meditation argument for mind–body distinctness:

The fact that I can clearly and distinctly understand one thing apart from another is enough to make me certain that the two things are distinct, since they are capable of being *separated* [*seorsim poni*], at least by God.

(AT VII 78; CSM II 54, emphasis mine)<sup>31</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Loeb (1981) and Markie (1994) correctly point out that Descartes’s notion of substance is not this clear-cut. I agree that the picture is much more complicated than I am portraying it. However, I do believe that in the final analysis, Descartes’s preferred account of substance is in terms of independence. Unfortunately this is not something I have the space to argue here.

<sup>28</sup> Of course, this is a worry for Descartes, but not for Spinoza.

<sup>29</sup> See *Principles* I 51:

In the case of all other substances, we perceive that they can exist only with the help of God’s concurrence . . . In the case of created things, some are of such a nature that they cannot exist without other things, while some need only the ordinary concurrence of God in order to exist. We make this distinction by calling the latter ‘substances’ and that former ‘qualities’ or ‘attributes’ of those substances.

(AT VIII A 24; CSM I 210)

And:

when we call a created substance self-subsistent we do not rule out the divine concurrence which it needs in order to subsist. We mean only that it is the kind of thing that can exist without any other created thing; and this is something that cannot be said about the modes of things, like shape and number.

(AT III 429; CSMK 193–4)

<sup>30</sup> Cf. AT VII 185; CSM II 130.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. AT VII 169–70, 227; CSM II 119–20, 160.

The *separability* of really distinct things is reiterated in the *Principles*:

For no matter how closely God may have united them [i.e. mind and body], the power which he previously had of *separating* them or keeping one in being without the other, is something he could not lay aside; and things which God has the power to *separate*, or to keep in being *separately*, are really distinct.

(AT VIII A 29; CSM I 213, emphasis mine)

Thus, Descartes holds RD2 and RD3:

RD2: There is a *real distinction* between x and y iff x is separable from y and y is separable from x<sup>32</sup>

where ‘separability’ is analyzed as follows:

RD3: x is *separable* from y iff x can really exist without y.<sup>33</sup>

That is, in the case of a real distinction between x and y, there is a *mutual separability* between x and y.<sup>34</sup> In the case of the real distinction between mind and body, for instance, both the mind and body would remain complete substances even if they were separated.<sup>35</sup>

### **The Modal Distinction (*distinctio modalis*)**

Descartes calls the ‘intermediate’ distinction a ‘modal’ distinction, and he introduces it in *Principles* I 61:

A *modal distinction* can be taken in two ways: firstly, as a distinction between a mode, properly so-called, and the substance of which it is a mode; and secondly, as a distinction between two modes of the same substance.

(AT VIII A 29; CSM I 213–14)

The following (uninformatively) captures the two types of modal distinction:

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Suarez DM 7.1.26. Marleen Rozemond (1998) thinks that there is more to the story than separability. Unfortunately, I do not have the space to address her ingenious interpretation in this paper.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. AT VII 220–2; CSM II 155–6.

<sup>34</sup> See AT VII 162; CSM II 114. This point is noticed by Lilli Alanen (1986) pp. 227–8. She points out that making mutual separability a necessary condition for real distinction distinguishes Descartes’s account of a real distinction from those of Duns Scotus and Ockham, who only held that there needs to be non-mutual separability for a real distinction to hold. For instance, they seem to think that a person’s form is really distinct from its matter and that a person’s sensory soul is really distinct from its intellectual soul. See Adams (1987) p. 17, and Rozemond (1998) pp. 3–9, and Dutton (1993).

<sup>35</sup> Cf. AT III 567; CSMK 214, and Wells (1965) p. 3.

MD1: There is a *modal distinction* between x and y iff (i) x is a substance and y is a mode of x or vice versa, or (ii) x and y are two modes of the same substance.

Once again, Descartes gives us an epistemic guide to recognizing the distinction in question. We can clearly and distinctly perceive a substance apart from a mode but not vice versa, and we can understand one mode apart from another mode (of the same substance), but we can understand neither without the substance of which they are both modes.<sup>36</sup> As Descartes states:

[The modal distinction] applies only to incomplete entities [*entia incompleta*] ... It is sufficient for this kind of distinction that one thing be conceived distinctly and separately from another by an abstraction of the intellect which conceives the thing inadequately.

(AT VII 120; CSM II 85–6)

The mode, which is only modally distinct from its substance, will not be conceived adequately precisely because an adequate conception of a mode necessarily involves the conception of the substance of which it is a mode.<sup>37</sup> For instance, in *Notae in Programma quoddam*, Descartes states

it is part of the nature of a mode that, although we can readily understand a substance apart from a mode, we cannot vice versa clearly understand a mode unless at the same time we have a conception of the substance of which it is a mode.

(AT VIII B 350; CSM I 298)

What is important to notice about Descartes's characterization of the modal distinction is the work being done, once again, by the notion of separability: While the substance is separable from its modes, a mode is not separable from the substance of which it is a mode. In an example used by Descartes, we can understand a body (corporeal substance) existing apart from its shape and motion, but we cannot understand its shape or motion existing apart from the body.<sup>38</sup>

We can now give a deeper analysis of the two types of modal distinction for Descartes:

MD2: There is a modal distinction<sub>1</sub> between x and y iff x is separable from y but y is not separable from x (or vice versa).<sup>39</sup>

<sup>36</sup> In the case of a modal distinction between two modes, m1 and m2, of the same substance S, we can conceive of *S with m1 and not m2* and *S with m2 and not m1*; but we cannot conceive either m1 or m2 without S. Cf. AT VIII 29–30; CSM I 213–14, AT VII 78; CSM II 54.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. AT VIII B 355; CSM I 301, and Wells (1965) pp. 5–6.

<sup>38</sup> AT VIII A 29–30; CSM I 213–14.

<sup>39</sup> See Suarez DM 7.2.6–7.

MD3: There is a modal distinction<sub>2</sub> between x and y iff (i) there is a substance S, of which x and y are modes, (ii) x is not separable from S and y is not separable from S, but S is separable from x and S is separable from y, and (iii) S-with-x is separable from S-with-y (and vice versa).<sup>40</sup>

Modal distinctions, unlike real distinctions, merely require a *non-mutual separability*<sup>41</sup> between substance and mode.

### The Conceptual Distinction (*distinctio rationis*)

Descartes introduces the conceptual distinction in *Principles* I 62:

[A] conceptual distinction is a distinction between a substance and some attribute of that substance without which the substance is unintelligible; alternatively, it is a distinction between two such attributes of a single substance.  
(AT VIII A 30; CSM I 214)

Descartes distinguishes *attributes* from modes/accidents. The latter are inessential properties of a substance, and the former are essential properties of a substance.<sup>42</sup> When speaking strictly, Descartes states that among creatures there are only two ('principal', as he calls them) attributes: thought and extension, which constitute the essence of mind and body respectively.<sup>43</sup> But when speaking more loosely, he states that other essential properties are attributes.<sup>44</sup> However, it is clear from the context of *Principles* I 62 that Descartes intends 'attribute' to be taken in the sense of 'essential property in general' when characterizing the conceptual distinction. Thus, in the *Principles*, Descartes characterizes a conceptual distinction as follows:

CD1: There is a *conceptual distinction* between x and y only if (i) x is a substance and y is an essential property of x (or vice versa) or (ii) x and y are essential properties of the same substance.

Given CD1, we can partially characterize the conceptual distinction in terms of separability. Unlike the real and modal distinction, in which there is some degree of separability involved, the conceptual distinction lacks this feature. That is,

CD2: x and y are conceptually distinct only if x and y are mutually *inseparable*.

<sup>40</sup> Condition (iii) simply means that it is possible for S to exist with x and without y and vice versa. Cf. AT IV 349; CSMK 279–80.

<sup>41</sup> See Wells (1965) p.p 5, 11.

<sup>42</sup> See AT IV 348–9; CSMK 279–80, AT VIII A 26; CSM I 211.

<sup>43</sup> See AT VIII A 25; CSM I 210.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. AT IV 349–50; CSMK 280–1 and Alanen (1986) p. 231.

While I believe that CD2 is correct, I don't believe that CD1 captures Descartes's *general* thinking about the conceptual distinction. The primary reason I have for believing this is that CD1 does not capture one of Descartes's well-known uses of the conceptual distinction. In the Third Meditation, Descartes mentions a conceptual distinction between God's creation and conservation:

For it is quite clear to anyone who attentively considers the nature of time that the same power and action are needed to conserve anything at each individual moment of its duration as would be required to create that thing anew if it were not yet in existence. Hence conservation differs from creation merely by reason [*conservationem sola ratione a creatione differe*] [i.e. by a conceptual distinction].

(AT VII 49; CSM II 48)

In this case, Descartes is claiming that there is merely a conceptual distinction between God's creation of a thing and his conservation of that thing. Contra CD1, the notions of substance and attribute do not have any place in this use of the conceptual distinction. However, I think Descartes's primary point in *Principles* I.62 is merely that a conceptual distinction involves mutual inseparability. In the case of the conceptual distinction between creation and conservation, we have an instance of mutual inseparability because conservation just *is* (continuous) creation.

Notice, however, that mutual inseparability is merely a necessary condition and not sufficient for a conceptual distinction. This should be expected. After all, there is a relation of mutual inseparability between a person and himself, say, Deaton and himself (in virtue of their being identical; so, *a fortiori* they are mutually inseparable), but there is not necessarily a conceptual distinction between them. Although it goes unmentioned in *Principles* 1.62, there is another condition which is necessary, and is jointly sufficient with the condition stated in CD2, for a conceptual distinction. In order for there to be a conceptual distinction between *x* and *y*, there must be concepts  $C_1$  and  $C_2$  (where  $C_1 \neq C_2$ ), and *x* is understood under  $C_1$  (or  $C_2$ ) and *y* is understood under  $C_2$  (or  $C_1$ ). Descartes states this in a 1645 or 1646 letter to an unknown correspondent (AT IV 348–50; CSMK 279–81).<sup>45</sup> So, according to Descartes, mutual inseparability *plus* differing concepts are necessary and sufficient for a conceptual distinction.

Descartes's inherits his understanding of the modal and conceptual distinctions in large part from Suarez. This is apparent from the fact that in one of Descartes's most sustained discussions of the conceptual distinction, he essentially repeats Suarez's account from the Seventh 'Metaphysical Disputation'. Suarez states his account as follows:

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Secada (2000) pp. 197–8 and Nolan (1997a).

Conceptual distinctions are usually considered to be of two kinds. One, which has no foundation in reality [*fundamentum in re*] is called '*rationis ratiocinantis*', because it arises *exclusively* from the reflection [*negotatione*] and activity of the intellect. The other which has a *foundation in reality* is called by many '*rationis ratiocinatae*'. . . For the *distinctio rationis ratiocinatae* can be understood as pre-existing in reality prior to the discriminating operation of the mind, so as to be thought of as imposing itself, as it were, on the intellect, and to require the intellect [*ratio*] only to recognize it, but not to constitute it.

(DM VII.1.4, emphasis mine)

Descartes also discusses these two general types of conceptual distinction. He writes of 'a conceptual distinction, that is, *rationis Ratiocinatae*. I do not recognize any distinction *rationis Ratiocinantis*, that is, one which has no foundation in reality [*fundamentum in rebus*]' (AT IV 349; CSMK 280). Unfortunately, Descartes does not explain what *he* means by a conceptual distinction having a foundation or lacking one; in fact, his entire discussion of the conceptual distinction is unfortunately grossly underdeveloped. However, if we accept, as I do, that Descartes's account of distinctions bears remarkable similarity to Suarez's account (too much of a similarity to be coincidence, I think), then we catch a glimpse of what Descartes means by a 'foundation in reality' by looking at Suarez's explanation.<sup>46</sup> Suarez explains what he means when he says that a *distinctio rationis ratiocinatae* has a foundation in reality as follows:

A *distinctio rationis ratiocinatae*, because it arises not entirely from the mere operation of the intellect, but from an occasion offered by the thing itself on which the mind is reflecting. Hence the foundation that is held to exist *in re* for this distinction is not a true and actual distinction between things said to be distinct; for then not the *foundation* of the distinction but the *distinction itself* would precede mental operation. Rather the foundation must be either the eminence of the object which the mind thus distinguishes . . . or at any rate, it must be some reference to other things which are truly distinct in the real order, and with respect to which such a connection is excogitated [*excogitatur*] or conceived.

(DM VII.1.4, emphasis mine)

That is, this type of distinction is not something that really obtains in the world, but there is *something* in the world which allows us ('offers the occasion') to make a distinction. According to Suarez, in the case of conceptual distinctions in God,

<sup>46</sup> The correspondence between Suarez's and Descartes' accounts of distinctions is not perfect. Unlike Descartes, Suarez allows that there are real distinctions in cases of non-mutual separability. However, even Suarez notes only three exceptions to the mutual separability criterion for a real distinction: (i) God and creatures, (ii) a relation and its terms, and (iii) the divine persons. See DM 7.2.25–7 and Dutton (1993) p. 249.

we partition into concepts in line with the various effects of which that eminent virtue is the principle, or by analogy [*per proportionem*] with various virtues which we find distinct in man, but which in a most eminent way are found united in the absolutely simple virtue of God.

(DM VII.1.5)

Take, for instance, the latter ‘foundation’ for the conceptual distinction mentioned by Suarez. What Suarez means is that there is a conceptual distinction with a foundation (i.e. *distinctio rationis ratiocinatae*) when the following obtains: there are properties or faculties which are distinct in *something* (man, for instance), but which in God are identical. For instance, man’s goodness, intellect, power, etc., are distinct, but in God, all of these are identical. However, we can come to have different concepts of God’s goodness, intellect, power, etc., by considering their distinctness in man. In this way, the conceptual distinction between God’s intellect and power has a *foundation* in reality because there are some things in which these faculties or properties are not identical. In spite of Descartes’s silence on this matter, he certainly does recognize the difference between a *distinctio rationis ratiocinatae* and a *distinctio rationis ratiocinantis* (although he rejects the usefulness of the latter); as such, Suarez’s explanation of the foundation for the *distinctio rationis ratiocinatae* is certainly open to him.<sup>47</sup>

What commonly goes completely unnoticed is that not only does Descartes distinguish between a *distinctio rationis ratiocinatae* and a *distinctio rationis ratiocinantis*, but he also implicitly distinguishes two types of the *distinctio rationis ratiocinatae*: (i) One that holds between two things that are *essentially connected*, such as a body and its endurance (i.e. there is no possible state of affairs in which a body exists without enduring); and (ii) one that holds between *identicals*, such as a body and its extension or a rational animal and a man.<sup>48</sup> A *distinctio rationis ratiocinatae* of the first type is, so to speak, a ‘greater’ distinction, because a body is not identical to its endurance even though it is a necessary truth that a body has endurance. A *distinctio rationis ratiocinatae* of the second type is a case in which there is a real *identity* between a body and its extension, but a conceptual distinction between them. There must be a conceptual distinction between body and extension in order to account for the fact that ‘a body has an extension’ makes sense, but ‘an extension has a body’ does not, even though a body and its extension are identical and any (extensional) relation which holds between identicals in one direction should hold in the other direction.

<sup>47</sup> There is no reason to think that Descartes would have explained the foundation of the *distinctio rationis ratiocinatae* any differently from Suarez. Not only is Descartes’s division of the conceptual distinction exactly like Suarez’s, he even employs the exact same example (Peter’s being identical to himself) to illustrate the *distinctio rationis ratiocinantis*. See Suarez, DM VII.1.5 and Descartes, AT IV 350; CSMK 280–1.

<sup>48</sup> For Descartes’s claim that extension *is* body, see *Principles* I 63 (AT VIII A 30–1; CSM I 215).

To reflect the difference between these two types of conceptual distinction, let us call a conceptual distinction which holds between essentially connected things a ‘conceptual distinction<sub>1</sub>’, and one which holds between identicals a ‘conceptual distinction<sub>2</sub>’.

I realize that the textual evidence for distinguishing between conceptual distinctions<sub>1</sub> and conceptual distinctions<sub>2</sub> is not overwhelming. Moreover, at least one author has argued implicitly that Descartes does not recognize the conceptual distinction<sub>1</sub>. So, in order to make my case, a case which needs to be made before we address Descartes’s account of DDS, I will argue that there is no reason to think that Descartes does not recognize a conceptual distinction<sub>1</sub>; and I will argue that there are very strong systematic reasons why we should think that he did recognize that kind of distinction.

In two recent papers, Lawrence Nolan has asserted that Descartes believed that there is merely a conceptual distinction between a substance and its attributes because substance and its attributes are identical.<sup>49</sup> He continues:

[I]f my interpretation is correct, and a substance and its attributes are identical *in re*, then we should understand these propositions [i.e. propositions in which a substance term serves as the grammatical subject and an attribute term serves as the grammatical predicate, e.g. ‘a body is extended’.] as disguised identity statements. What Descartes really means to say is that a ‘body is its extension’, ‘God is his existence’, ‘my soul is its thinking’, where ‘is’ means ‘is identical with’.<sup>50</sup>

The examples that Nolan employs are very convincing, as they should be; after all, I’ll grant, as I’ve mentioned above, that a substance is identical to its *principal attribute*, and all of Nolan’s examples above refer to principal attributes or to the attributes of God, all of which are identical with God.

Unfortunately, Nolan is not content to simply allow that principal attributes are identical to their substances; he insists that *all* of a substance’s attributes are identical to their substance. As evidence for this view, Nolan presents the following:

- (a) Descartes tells us that there is only a conceptual distinction between a substance and its attributes. Nolan takes this to mean that all of a substance’s attributes are ‘numerically identical *in re* and distinguished only within our thought. If attributes are only distinguished within our thought, then, Nolan thinks, they are identical *in re*.
- (b) Nolan provides some apparent textual evidence for his view. In the *Principles*, Descartes states that ‘thought and extension . . . cannot be conceived as anything other than thinking substance itself and extended substance itself [*non aliter concipi debent quam ipsa substantia cogitans*

<sup>49</sup> Nolan (1997a), (1997b).

<sup>50</sup> Nolan (1997b) pp. 164–5.

*et substantia extensa*], that is, as mind and body' (AT VIII A 30–31; CSM I 215). Furthermore, in a letter to an unknown correspondent in 1645 or 1646, Descartes states that the essence and existence of a triangle are 'in no way distinct' [*nullo modo distingui*] outside of our thought (AT IV 350; CSMK 280). Existence is an attribute, but clearly not a principal attribute; there are only two principal attributes: thought and extension. So, Nolan draws the conclusion that, not only the principal attributes, but all the attributes are identical to their substances.

Contra (a): As we have seen, Descartes characterizes the real and modal distinctions in terms of separability. This much seems uncontroversial. In the texts in which Descartes discusses the conceptual distinction, he again uses the notion of separability to account for this type of distinction. What Nolan ignores is the fact that two 'things' can be mutually inseparable without being identical: triangularity and trilaterality, for instance. There cannot be something that has trilaterality without also having triangularity, and vice versa; but it would require further argumentation to establish that they are identical. Nolan does not seem to notice this. So, because Descartes accounts for all the distinctions in terms of separability, and a conceptual distinction is a distinction in which mutual inseparability is found, and mutual inseparability does not (obviously) entail identity, Nolan has to give further reason to suppose that Descartes held that the attributes of a substance are identical to their substance. He has not done this.

Contra (b): The first piece of textual evidence Nolan provides simply supports my reading, a reading in which Descartes holds that the principal attribute of a substance is identical to the substance. As such, we may ignore it as irrelevant to Nolan's purposes. The second piece of textual evidence is a bit trickier. It states that there is no distinction outside our thought between a triangle's essence and existence. I grant this as well, as long as we understand, as Descartes and Nolan's Descartes do, that this means that there is neither a real distinction nor a modal distinction between a triangle's essence and existence. Of course, there is no possible state of affairs in which a triangle exists without existing; hence, existence is an attribute of a triangle, because the two are mutually inseparable. Hence, there is only a conceptual distinction between them. However, the only way that Nolan can establish that an existing triangle's existence and essence are identical, and not merely mutually inseparable, is by arguing further that whatever is mutually inseparable is identical; he does not do this.

We have seen that Nolan does not provide reason to suppose that Descartes held that all of a substance's attributes are identical to their substance. So, we have no evidence *against* distinguishing between the two types of conceptual distinction. Is there any positive reason to suppose that Descartes did *not* hold Nolan's view? I think that there are strong systematic reasons to suppose this. First, on my account, which allows two different kinds of conceptual distinction, Descartes makes sense of the difference

between principal attributes and run-of-the-mill attributes. Principal attributes are conceptually distinct<sub>2</sub> from their substance; they are identical with their substance. Run-of-the-mill attributes, such as duration, existence, etc., are conceptually distinct<sub>1</sub> from their substance; a substance and its run-of-the-mill attributes are merely mutually inseparable.

There is also some textual evidence for this view: The only texts in which Descartes claims an identity between a substance and an attribute concern only the principal attributes of thought and extension and the attributes of God. Descartes *never* claims that any other attributes are identical to their substance. Given that Descartes claims that principal attributes are identical to their substances but does not claim that other attributes are identical to their substances *and* he, as Nolan correctly points out, does think that the distinction between a substance and any of its attributes, principal or otherwise, is a conceptual distinction, Descartes would seem to be committed to the two types of *distinctio rationis ratiocinatae* I have mentioned.

Second, my interpretation is more in line with Descartes's overall theory of distinctions. He clearly provides a separability criterion for the real and modal distinctions. It would be very odd if he were then to provide an altogether different account of the conceptual distinction. In the interest of consistency I prefer my account of Descartes's theory of the conceptual distinction. Consistency, by itself, would be insufficient for attributing to Descartes the difference between a conceptual distinction<sub>1</sub> and conceptual distinction<sub>2</sub>; however, the fact that there is no reason to accept Nolan's interpretation *plus* Descartes's insistence that principal attributes are identical to their substances *plus* Descartes's silence concerning whether other attributes are identical to their substances would lead naturally to my interpretation.

### DESCARTES'S ACCOUNT OF DDS

Now that we have both Descartes's reasons for DDS and his theory of distinctions in hand, we are in a position to see exactly what Descartes's version of DDS amounts to.

In his book, *Descartes and Augustine*, Stephen Menn states that it is commonly thought that Descartes is 'proclaiming a new and radical doctrine of God's simplicity'.<sup>51</sup> This initially seems to be the case, especially in the following passages:

In God willing, understanding and creating are all the same thing without one being prior to [*precede*] the other even conceptually [*ne quidem ratione*].

(AT I 153; CSMK 25–6)

<sup>51</sup> Menn (1998) p. 348.

It is impossible to imagine that anything is thought of in the divine intellect as good or true, or worthy of belief or action or omission, prior to the decision of the divine will to make it so. I am not speaking here of temporal priority: I mean that there is not even any priority of order, or nature or *ratione ratiocinata* as they call it [*Neque hic loquor de prioritate temporis, sed ne quidem prius fuit ordine, vel natura, vel ratione ratiocinata ut vocant*].

(AT VII 432; CSM II 291)

From these passages, we may be tempted to think that Descartes held the following account of DDS:

DDS1: God is simple =<sub>df</sub> There are no distinctions of any kind (real, modal or conceptual) in God.

The passages quoted above certainly lend prima-facie support to such a reading of Descartes.

However, there are three good reasons to reject DDS1 as an interpretation of Descartes's account of DDS: first, despite initial appearances, there is no textual evidence to support DDS1 as an interpretation of Descartes on DDS. In neither of the passages quoted above does Descartes state that there are no conceptual *distinctions* in God. He merely states that there is no conceptual *priority* between God's intellect and will.<sup>52</sup> But certainly *x* and *y* can be conceptually *distinct* without one being conceptually *prior* to the other; and Descartes would most likely be aware of this. To use an example already mentioned, take two of a triangle's essential properties: triangularity and trilaterality. It is reasonable to suppose that *even if* these properties are really identical, as those who hold that necessarily co-extensive properties are identical would say,<sup>53</sup> they are conceptually distinct. However, what isn't clear is whether there is any conceptual *priority* of one over the other. It seems to me that no non-question-begging definition of 'conceptual priority' can be given such that triangularity is conceptually prior to trilaterality (or vice versa), despite the fact that they are conceptually distinct. So, not only does DDS1 lack *direct* textual evidence, but also we cannot even *indirectly* infer that Descartes held DDS1 because 'no conceptual priority' does not entail 'no conceptual distinction'.

Second, Descartes repeatedly predicates a plurality of attributes to God. Descartes states that God is 'perfect' (AT VIIIA 10; CSM I 197), 'omniscient' (AT VI 35; CSM I 128), 'omnipotent' (AT VII 21; CSM II 14, AT VI 35; CSM I 128, AT VIIIA 10; CSM I 197), 'supremely good' (AT VII 45; CSM II 35, AT VI 35; CSM I 128), 'infinite' (AT VII 45; CSM II 35, AT VI 35; CSM I 128), 'independent' (AT VII 45; CSM II 35), 'eternal' (AT VI 35;

<sup>52</sup> I thank Lex Newman for bringing this crucial point to my attention and saving me from making a major mistake.

<sup>53</sup> For instance, David Lewis, in section 1.5 of Lewis (1986). It should be noted that Lewis holds that this would not be true on some understandings of what properties are.

CSM I 128), 'immutable' (AT I 146; CSMK 215, AT VI 35; CSM I 128), and that he has will and understanding (AT I 149, 153; CSMK 24,26). How are we to understand the plurality of attributes predicated of God if there are no distinctions of *any* kind in God? It would be very difficult, to say the least.

Third, whenever Descartes characterizes his version of DDS, he explicitly raises the issue of separability; that is, God is such that he does not have any *separable* parts. The following passages are representative of Descartes's thinking on DDS. In the Third Meditation, he states:

the unity, 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 [*unitas, simplicitas, sive inseparabilitas eorum omnium quae in Deo sunt, una est praecipuis perfectionibus quas in eo esse intelligo*].<sup>54</sup> And surely the idea of the unity of all his perfections could not have been placed in me by any cause which did not also provide me with the ideas of the other perfections; for no cause could have made me understand the interconnection and *inseparability* of the perfections without at the same time making me recognize what they were.

(AT VII 50; CSM II 34, emphasis mine)

And in the *Conversation with Burman*, he states: 'Whatever is in God is not in reality *separate* from God himself; rather it is God himself [*imo est ipse Deus*].' (AT V 166; CSMK 348, emphasis mine). Later in the same passage, Descartes states that there is, however, a 'mental' (i.e. conceptual) distinction that exists between God and his decrees. Moreover, in the Fifth Meditation, Descartes states that 'existence can no more be *separated* from the essence of God than the fact that its three angles equal two right angles can be separated from the essence of a triangle' (AT VII 66; CSM II 46).

In the Third Meditation passage, Descartes is identifying the simplicity of God with the inseparability of his attributes. And in the *Burman* passage, Descartes is stating that there is nothing in God that can be separated from him. Finally, in the Fifth Meditation passage, Descartes is stating that God's essence and existence are inseparable.

Remember that there are two types of the *distinctio rationis rationcinatae*: one that holds between essentially connected things (i.e. a conceptual distinction<sub>1</sub>), and one that holds between identical things (i.e. a conceptual distinction<sub>2</sub>). In the passage from the 27 May 1630 letter to Mersenne (AT I 153; CSMK 25–6), Descartes states two things: first, God's willing and understanding are *the same thing*. I take this to mean uncontroversially that they are really identical. Second, he states that neither God's will nor his understanding is conceptually prior to the other. I'll return to this issue shortly. What we can see here is that the type of conceptual distinction that holds between God's will and his understanding is what I've called a

<sup>54</sup> Notice that the 'or' here is '*sive*', indicating that Descartes is stating that the simplicity of God is one and the same thing as the inseparability of his attributes.

conceptual distinction<sub>2</sub>; that is, one that holds between two things which are not merely essentially connected, but are identical.

So, Descartes does not hold DDS1, but rather DDS2:

DDS2: God is simple =<sub>df</sub> There are no real distinctions, modal distinctions, or conceptual distinctions<sub>1</sub> in God.<sup>55</sup>

That there cannot be modal distinctions in God follows trivially from Descartes's insistence that God has no modes, but only *attributes*.<sup>56</sup> If God has only attributes, then by Descartes's definition of a modal distinction, God cannot have any modal distinctions. So, God either has real distinctions, conceptual distinctions or no distinctions at all. As we have seen Descartes cannot hold that there are real distinctions in God, because there is *no* separability in God. Yet because Descartes allows that something may be conceptually distinct from its attributes *and* that two attributes of the same thing may be conceptually distinct *and* that identicals may be conceptually distinct, Descartes can (and does) hold that there are conceptual distinctions<sub>2</sub> in God.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>55</sup> I think that distinguishing between conceptual distinctions<sub>1</sub> and conceptual distinctions<sub>2</sub> helps make sense of Descartes insistence that not only is God simple, but also the human mind is simple. (See AT VII 13, 85–6; CSM II 9, 59). Clearly, Descartes does not think that the human mind is simple in the sense that its faculties (intellect and will) are identical; the human intellect and will could not be identical because it is possible to understand (the function of the intellect) a proposition without assenting (the function of the will) to it. So, they are not identical. (In fact, the epistemic lesson of the *Meditations* is to refrain from assenting to (with the will) certain types of propositions (entertained by the intellect), i.e. those not clearly and distinctly understood.) I take it that Descartes means that the human intellect and will are mutually inseparable; that is, it is impossible to have one without the other. In other words, the human mind is simple in the sense that it has only conceptual distinctions<sub>1</sub>.

<sup>56</sup> AT VIII A 26; CSM I 211. This seems to commit Descartes to the view that God has no properties contingently. So, even the property of creating Adam would be essential to God, i.e. it is not possible for God to exist without creating Adam. This is problematic. The solution is to distinguish between God's intrinsic properties, all of which are essential properties (i.e. attributes), and his relational properties, some of which are inessential.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. AT VII 383; CSM II 263. Interestingly enough, this is the account given by Spinoza in his *Cogitata Metaphysica*, appendices to his *Renati Des Cartes Principiorum Philosophiae*. There Spinoza states that

it is self-evident that component parts are prior at least by nature to the composite whole, then of necessity those substances from whose coalescence and union God is composed will be prior by nature, and each can be conceived through itself without being attributed to God. Again, because they are necessarily distinct from one another in reality, then necessarily each of them can exist through itself without the help of the others . . . Hence we can clearly conclude that all the distinctions we make between God's attributes are nothing other than distinctions of reason, and that they are not distinct from one another in reality.

Moreover, the fact that DDS2 is consistent with there being conceptual distinctions in God helps make some sense of the ‘plurality’ of attributes Descartes predicates of God. In fact, this was one of the standard medieval uses of the conceptual distinction.<sup>58</sup> While the divine attributes are *really identical* with each other and with God, they are conceptually distinct.<sup>59</sup> That is, we understand the attributes of God under different (albeit inadequate) concepts, and as such we can use different predicates of God.

Because (i) the texts support a reading of DDS in which there is nothing separable in God, *and* (ii) a general consideration of the nature of Descartes’s God as not having modes eliminates the possibility of modal distinctions in God, *and* (iii) allowing conceptual distinctions in God makes sense of Descartes’s predication of various attributes to God, we ought to accept DDS2 is the correct account of Descartes’ version of DDS.

### DDS AND THE REJECTION OF THE MODERATE ALTERNATIVE

Now that we have the appropriate materials in hand, showing why Descartes could not accept the moderate alternative is quick work. Because a conceptual distinction<sub>2</sub> between x and y is a creation of the mind, indicating only that x and y are mutually inseparable *and* that the manner in which we understand x is different from the manner in which we understand y,<sup>60</sup> despite the identity of x and y, Descartes still holds that whatever is *really* true of one conceptually distinct<sub>2</sub> thing is really true of the other. For instance, whatever is really true of a body is true of its extension and vice versa. So, even though Descartes holds DDS2, whatever is really true of God’s intellect is also really true of God’s will because they are *really identical*, though conceptually distinct<sub>2</sub>.

We can now see exactly why Descartes cannot accept the moderate alternative account of the relationship between God and the eternal truths. On these accounts, the eternal truths are not objects of God’s will. Thus,

1 The eternal truths do not depend on God’s will.

But Descartes holds DDS2. Thus,

2 Despite the conceptual distinction<sub>2</sub> between God’s will and intellect,  
God’s will = God’s intellect = God.

So, from (1), and (2), by the transitivity of identity:

<sup>58</sup> See Adams (1987) p. 19.

<sup>59</sup> This is contrary to the interpretations of Cronin (1960) and Alanen (1985) p. 183.

<sup>60</sup> See Adams (1987) p. 19.

## 3 The eternal truths do not depend on God.

Therefore:

## 4 The Dependence Thesis is false.

Descartes could not accept the moderate alternative precisely because, when conjoined with DDS, it entails the denial of the Dependence Thesis. A denial of this thesis is exactly why he cannot accept the position of, for instance, Suarez and Scotus, i.e. that the eternal truths are true independently of God. The moderate alternative apparently does not fare any better. By denying that the eternal truths depend on God's will while accepting DDS, we get a violation of the Dependence Thesis. It seems as though one cannot deny the Creation Doctrine while accepting DDS.

Although Descartes does not explicitly state this reasoning, there is nothing contained in the argument that Descartes does not accept. And it explains why Descartes cannot accept the moderate alternative.

Or Descartes can go another way. Because Descartes holds that God's intellect and will are identical, and neither is conceptually prior to the other, he holds the following:

5  $x$  is an object of the divine intellect iff  $x$  is an object of the divine will.<sup>61</sup>

From (5) and the moderate alternative, we can deduce:

## 6 The eternal truths are objects of the divine will.

So, (and here is the rub) either the moderate alternative entails a denial of the dependence thesis or DDS, or it entails that the eternal truths depend on God's will (by the identity of God's intellect and will). If it entails a denial of the Dependence Thesis or DDS, then it is clear why Descartes rejects the moderate alternative; if it entails that the eternal truths depend on God's will, then Descartes gets exactly what he wants, and the moderate alternative doesn't fundamentally differ from the Creation Doctrine. So, it turns out that the moderate alternative may be neither 'moderate' (if it entails the denial of DDS or the dependence thesis) nor a genuine 'alternative' (if does not differ fundamentally from the Creation Doctrine).

A defender of the moderate alternative surely would have a response to Descartes's reasoning. However, defending the moderate alternative

<sup>61</sup> This does not mean that whatever God understands He wills to be *actual*. It simply means that God cannot understand a proposition without also willing it. God understands certain propositions as actually true, some as necessarily true, and some as possibly true. This means that God wills that some propositions are actually true, some necessarily true, and some possibly true. For a brief explanation of this view, see Kaufman (2002).

against Descartes is not my concern in this paper. I have merely attempted to show why Descartes felt committed to the Creation Doctrine, given his acceptance of DDS. I leave it to others to show how Descartes can avoid the Creation Doctrine while accepting DDS.<sup>62</sup>

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