

DESCARTES'S CREATION DOCTRINE AND MODALITY¹

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In a series of three letters to Mersenne in 1630, Descartes first presented his idea that the eternal truths² are freely created by God.

The mathematical truths which you call eternal have been laid down by God and depend on him entirely no less than the rest of his creatures (AT I 145; CSMK 23).

In God willing and knowing are a single thing in such a way that by the very fact of willing something he knows it and it is only for this reason that such a thing is true (AT I 149; CSMK 24).

I know that God is the author of everything and that these [eternal] truths are something and consequently that he is their author . . . [F]rom eternity he willed and understood them to be, and by that very fact he created them (AT I 152; CSMK 25).

Although this 'Creation Doctrine'³ does not appear in the 'body' of the *Meditations* of 1641, it was held by Descartes until at least 1648.⁴ The Creation Doctrine has been called a number of things, none of which are particularly kind.⁵ In fact, until now, one of the

¹ In this paper I employ the following abbreviations:

AT = Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (eds.), *Oeuvres de Descartes* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1996). 'AT' is followed by volume and page number.

CSM = John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (eds.), *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, volumes I and II (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985). 'CSM' is followed by volume and page number.

CSMK = John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny (eds.), *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, volume III (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991). 'CSMK' is followed by page number.

In some cases, my translations of AT differ from the CSM or CSMK translations.

² In the *Principles* (AT VIII 23–4; CSM I 209) Descartes lists 'the proposition[s] *Nothing comes from nothing . . . it is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be at the same time; What is done cannot be undone; He who thinks cannot but exist while he thinks*' as examples of eternal truths.

³ This term is from Margaret Wilson and Edwin Curley. See Margaret Wilson, *Descartes* (London: Routledge, 1978); Edwin Curley, 'Descartes on the Creation of Eternal Truths', *Philosophical Review* 93 (1984), pp. 569–97.

⁴ See 29 July 1648 letter to Arnauld (AT V 223–4; CSMK 358–9). Although the Creation Doctrine does not appear in the 'body' of the *Meditations*, it appears in the Fifth and Sixth sets of Objections and Replies.

⁵ In the 'Discourse on Metaphysics', Leibniz argued that Descartes' view 'unknowingly destroy[s] . . . all the love of God and all his glory. For why praise him for what he has done if he would be equally praiseworthy in doing the exact opposite.' In Leroy Loemker (ed.), *Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz: Philosophical Papers and Letters*, second edition (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1969), p. 304. Moreover, because Descartes's God wills without there being alternatives 'given' prior to his willing, Leibniz believed that the Creation Doctrine rendered God unfree. See G.W. Leibniz, *Theodicy*, trans. E.M. Huggard (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1985), pp. 244–5. In Part I, Proposition

most flattering things said about the Creation Doctrine and its relation to modality has been Alvin Plantinga's concession that 'Descartes' view is neither unintelligible nor incoherent. The most we can fairly say . . . is that his view is strongly counterintuitive'.⁶ Some even take Descartes' Creation Doctrine to entail that there are no necessary truths; or, at the very least, that there are no necessarily necessary truths.⁷

In this paper, I make a start toward an adequate and *sympathetic* understanding of the Creation Doctrine and its consequences for modality. In particular, I will show how the following claims—both of which were held by Descartes—are not inconsistent with one another:

- (1) The eternal truths are freely created by God.
- (2) The eternal truths are necessarily true.

Descartes's commitment to (1) is uncontroversial; in fact, it is merely a concise statement of the Creation Doctrine. However, his commitment to (2) is more controversial. I believe the controversy surrounding (2) arises not because of lack of textual support, but rather because Descartes's acceptance of (1) is so uncontroversial. That is, some have thought that his commitment to (1) eliminates any possibility of accepting (2). I will show that this view is mistaken.

In the first section, I will discuss two prominent interpretations of the Creation Doctrine and its implications for modality: Universal Possibilism (UP) and Limited Possibilism (LP).⁸ Both UP and LP have the same noble motivation: both try to understand the modal implications of a particular statement Descartes makes in the 2 May 1644 letter to Mesland: 'God cannot have been determined to make it true that contradictories cannot be true together, and therefore that he *could* have done the opposite [*il a pu faire le contraire*]' (AT IV 118; CSMK 235, emphasis mine). UP and LP are attempts to understand the sense in which God *could have* willed that an eternal truth be false and the implications this 'could' has for the modal status of propositions. This is not an easy task. In fact, Frankfurt has stated that '[w]hat is troublesome . . . is . . . understanding the "could"'.⁹ Janet Broughton has stated that 'there is no good sense we can make of this

⁵ *continued*

33, Scholium 2 of the *Ethics*, Spinoza conceded that 'this opinion, which subjects all things to a certain indifferent will of God' is preferable only in relation to the view that God's will is determined by independent factors. In Edwin Curley (ed.), *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, volume I (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985). Moreover, the Creation Doctrine was condemned by the Jesuits in 1706. See Camille de Rochemonteix, *Un collège des Jésuites au XVIIe et XVIIIe siècle: Le collège Henri IV de la Flèche* (Le Mans: Leguicheux, 1889), vol. 4. And in a recent paper, Jonathan Bennett has catalogued the less-than-flattering adjectives used by twentieth-century scholars to characterise the Creation Doctrine. Among them are Nicholas Jolley's 'strange' and 'peculiar', Louis Loeb's 'peculiar' and 'curious', and Edwin Curley's 'incoherent'. See Jonathan Bennett, 'Descartes's Theory of Modality', *Philosophical Review* 103 (1994), pp. 639–67.

⁶ Alvin Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980), p. 24.

⁷ See Harry Frankfurt, 'Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths', *Philosophical Review* 86 (1977), pp. 36–57; Curley, 'Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths'.

⁸ These are Plantinga's terms. See Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?*, pp. 102–3.

⁹ Frankfurt, 'Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths', p. 43.

“could”¹⁰. And Lilli Alanen has stated: ‘How this “could” have willed or done otherwise should be accounted for is not very clear.’¹¹

Although both UP and LP make strong attempts to understand the ‘could’, I reject both on the same ground: they both presuppose something explicitly disallowed by the Creation Doctrine; hence they cannot be correct interpretations of Descartes.¹² In the second section, I show this by contrasting the Creation Doctrine with Leibniz’s account of the eternal truths. In the third section, I will present an interpretation of the Creation Doctrine in which there is a sense in which it is true to say that for any eternal truth P, God could have willed not-P but not true to say that not-P is possible. By doing this, we will see that Descartes’s acceptance of (1) is not inconsistent with his acceptance of (2). In the fourth section, I will show how my interpretation preserves Descartes’ idea that (clear and distinct) conceivability is a reliable guide to modality.

1.1. Universal Possibilism

The first interpretation I will examine states that Descartes is committed to UP. (I will refer to those who attribute UP to Descartes as ‘UPers’.) UP is the strong and controversial thesis that *for any proposition P, it is possible that P*. Essentially, UP is a denial that there are any necessary truths at all.

There have been only a few Descartes scholars who have been willing to attribute UP to Descartes.¹³ The most prominent UPer is Harry Frankfurt. In his seminal article, ‘Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths’, Frankfurt states that Descartes held that the eternal truths are ‘inherently as contingent as any other propositions’. His reasoning is based on the important and troublesome passages from the 2 May 1644 letter to Mesland quoted earlier stating that ‘[God] could have done the opposite’, and the 27 May 1630 letter to Mersenne, where Descartes states that God ‘was free to make it not true that all the radii of the circle are equal’ (AT I 152; CSMK 25). In these passages it seems that Descartes thinks that a necessary condition of (1) is (3):

(3) For any eternal truth P, God could have willed that not-P is true.

And because the ‘assertion that some state of affairs can be brought about ordinarily entails that that state of affairs is logically possible’,¹⁴ Frankfurt thinks that (3) (ordinarily) entails (4):

¹⁰ Janet Broughton, ‘Necessity and Physical Laws in Descartes’s Philosophy’, *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 68 (1987), p. 208.

¹¹ Lilli Alanen, ‘Descartes, Duns Scotus and Ockham on Omnipotence and Possibility’, *Franciscan Studies* 45 (1985), p. 168.

¹² One may object that UP or LP may be correct interpretations (though *both* cannot be correct) of Descartes because Descartes himself was inconsistent. I will show that Descartes is not inconsistent on the issue under consideration.

¹³ For instance, Timothy Cronin: ‘In the cartesian system there is nothing which is simply and universally good, for nothing is good save that which God, whose nature is wholly one and incomprehensible, wills to be good. There is no truth which is absolutely necessary, even the truth that the whole is greater than any of its parts . . .’ Timothy Cronin, *Objective Being in Descartes and Suarez* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1966), p. 37. Gijsbert Van Den Brink goes so far as to call UP ‘the extreme reading’ of Descartes’s Creation Doctrine. See Gijsbert Van Den Brink, ‘Descartes, Modalities, and God’, *International Journal of Philosophy of Religion* 33 (1993), p. 3.

¹⁴ Frankfurt, ‘Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths’, p. 43.

- (4) For any eternal truth P, it is possible that not-P.

But Frankfurt argues that if (4) is true, then an eternal truth, despite all appearances and our inability to conceive of it otherwise, is not a necessary truth. We can generalise our result, and we get the UP thesis: *For any proposition P it is possible that P*. As Curley recaps the reasoning behind UP: ‘Take any contradiction you like, God could have made it true. Hence it could have been. Hence, it is possible, even if false. Hence, anything is possible, there are no necessary truths’.¹⁵ Thus, if Descartes really holds UP, then he cannot consistently hold both (1) and (2).

Although Frankfurt thinks that Descartes is committed to UP, he does think that there is a difference between eternal truths and other truths, those which we would call ‘contingent’. The difference, however, is merely a feature of our finite minds: We are unable to conceive of the falsity of an eternal truth, and that is why we call certain truths ‘necessary’ despite the fact that *really* there are no necessary truths. As Frankfurt states:

[T]his inability to conceive the truth of a contradiction is, Descartes suggest, merely a contingent characteristic of our finite minds . . . That our minds cannot conceive such things signifies nothing beyond itself, however, except that God has freely chosen to create us like that.

The inconceivability of [an eternal truth’s] falsity . . . is not inherent in them. It is properly to be understood only as relative to the character of our minds . . . So we cannot presume that what we determine to be logically necessary coincides with the ultimate conditions of reality or of truth.¹⁶

I.2. Problems with UP

There are several problems with UP as an interpretation of Descartes’s Creation Doctrine, not the least of which is the fact that Descartes *does* hold (2). In the 1640 letter to Mesland, Descartes states, for instance: ‘And even though [*encore que*] God has willed that some truths should be necessary . . .’ (AT IV 118; CSMK 235). Furthermore, in the Fifth Meditation discussion of true and immutable essences, Descartes holds that there are propositions about triangles and God which are necessarily true and which are ‘not invented by me or dependent on my mind [*quae a me non efficta est, nec a mente*’

¹⁵ Curley, ‘Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths’, p. 571.

¹⁶ Frankfurt, ‘Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths’, pp. 44–5. Wilson, Plantinga, and Hide Ishiguro have held similar interpretations of Descartes. On these interpretations, there are no really necessary truths; we simply call certain truths ‘necessary’ because we cannot conceive of their falsity. Thus, our judgements of necessity are, strictly speaking, false. See Wilson, *Descartes*; Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?*; Hide Ishiguro, ‘The Status of Necessity and Impossibility in Descartes’ in Amelie Rorty (ed.), *Essays on Descartes’ Meditations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 459–71. Jonathan Bennett has recently proposed the view that Descartes held that we call certain truths ‘necessary’ because we cannot conceive of their falsity and because *conceivability is all there is to modality*. See Bennett, ‘Descartes’ Theory of Modality’. I disagree with both of these views, but I simply do not have the space here to adequately argue my case.

dependet]' (AT VII 64; CSM II 45).¹⁷ Also, in *Le Monde*, written a decade before the *Meditations* and around the time of the 'Creation Doctrine letters' to Mersenne, Descartes characterises the laws of nature as necessary truths, as truths such that 'if God had created many worlds, they would be as true in each of them as in this one' (AT XI 47; CSM I 97).¹⁸ And in the *Discourse on Method*, he reiterates this: 'I tried to demonstrate all those laws about which we could have any doubt, and to show that they are such that, even if God created many worlds, there could not be any in which they failed to be observed' (AT VI 43; CSM II 132). Curley points out that the necessity of the laws of nature is required by Descartes's *a priori* physics;¹⁹ and Van den Brink is quick to remind us that 'the initial reason Descartes gave for [the Creation Doctrine, in the 15 April 1630 letter to Mersenne] was precisely that it formed the foundation of his physics'.²⁰

Furthermore, Curley points out that *systematic* considerations alone are sufficient to show at least that Descartes *ought not* to have held UP. By systematic considerations, Curley has in mind constraints on Descartes imposed by virtue of the fact that he held certain more fundamental principles to be true. Among the systematic reasons against UP are the following:

Problem 1. Even if he is committed to the view that all of the essences of creatures and the eternal truths concerning such essences are contingent, Descartes never entertains, nor would he entertain the idea that the propositions *that God exists* and *God is powerful* are possibly false.²¹ At least these truths are necessary.²²

Problem 2. I have already alluded to the fact that Descartes' version of the Ontological Argument requires the existence of true and immutable essences that include properties

¹⁷ See AT VII 65–9; CSM II 45–7. A UPer may suggest that the 'or' here should be read as 'that is' or 'or in other words'. So, the statement would read in such a way as to make being invented by me equivalent to being dependent on my mind. However, the Latin, translated literally, states: 'which is not invented by me nor does it depend on my mind'. Thus, it seems that Descartes is not treating 'invented by me' and 'dependent on my mind' as equivalent in this passage.

¹⁸ Even some scholars who hold that Descartes's natural laws are not eternal truths nevertheless hold that they are necessary truths. In fact, Blake Dutton has recently argued that they are 'necessary to a greater degree' than the eternal truths. See Blake Dutton, 'Indifference, Necessity and Descartes's Derivation of the Laws of Motion', *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 34 (1996), pp. 193–212. While Dutton's arguments are admirable, I simply find it impossible to believe that Descartes thought that the natural laws have a greater degree of necessity than, say, the law of non-contradiction.

On a different note: I have reservations about interpreting Descartes's talk of 'worlds' in terms of our contemporary notion of 'possible worlds'. On *our* understanding of possible worlds, they are maximal and compossible states of affairs (or something along those lines); and no more than one world can be actual (that is, there cannot be more than one actual world even though *any* possible world could have been the one actual world). However, Descartes writes of God creating 'many worlds' [*plusieurs mondes*]. On the contemporary understanding, many worlds cannot actually exist. So, Descartes must mean something else by 'world' than what *we* mean. However, this does not affect the point that the laws of nature are necessary truths: they are necessary, but not *because* they would be true in any world God could create.

¹⁹ Curley, 'Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths'.

²⁰ Van den Brink, 'Descartes, Modalities, and God', p. 4.

²¹ See Norman Wells, 'Descartes' Uncreated Eternal Truths', *New Scholasticism* 56 (1982), pp. 185–99.

²² I leave the question whether Descartes believes there are any uncreated eternal truths alone in the present paper. It should be noted, however, that on the interpretation of Descartes developed in this paper, even if Descartes thinks that truths about God are created by God, it doesn't follow that Descartes thinks that truths about God are *possibly* false. This will become clear in section II.

that 'I now clearly recognize whether I want to or not' (AT VII 64; CSM II 45). Curley takes this to imply, and I agree, that Descartes thinks that the necessity found in the propositions concerning true and immutable essences is something that 'forces' itself upon our minds and not vice versa;²³ and among them is that 'it is necessary that [God] has existed from eternity and will abide for eternity' (AT VII 68; CSM II 47).

Problem 3. If UP is true, then Descartes's 'truth rule' (i.e., that everything I clearly and distinctly perceive is true) is either false or a ridiculous understatement. The reason for this is that Descartes believes that not only do we sometimes clearly and distinctly perceive the truth of a certain proposition, but sometimes we clearly and distinctly perceive the *necessary* truth of a particular proposition.²⁴ So, Descartes holds the following:

- (A) I clearly and distinctly perceive that it is necessary *that a triangle's three angles equal two right angles*

and, by the truth rule, (A) entails:

- (B) It is necessary that a triangle's three angles equal two right angles.

But if UP is true, then (C) is true:

- (C) It is possible *that a triangle's three angles do not equal two right angles*.

If (C) is true, then (B) is false; and thus the entailment from A to B is false. Thus, the truth rule is false, if UP is true. This should trouble any UPer. After all, the truth rule is Descartes's second or third most certain item of knowledge (after only the cogito and the fact that I am a thinking thing) and the most important epistemic principle in the *Meditations*, a work that is largely epistemological. If the Creation Doctrine jeopardizes Descartes's use of the truth rule, we must either reject the truth rule as applied to modal truths, reject the Creation Doctrine, or reject the idea that the Creation Doctrine entails UP. The first choice is *ad hoc* and unsupported by any textual evidence, and the second choice is not open to Descartes. I believe that the last choice is the correct one.

Descartes actively employs our powers of conception and their relation to possibility in his Sixth Meditation argument for the real distinction between mind and body:

I know that everything which I clearly and distinctly understand is capable of being created by God so as to correspond exactly with my understanding of it . . . [O]n the one hand I have a clear and distinct idea of myself in so far as I am simply a thinking, non-extended thing; and on the other hand I have a distinct idea of body, in so far as this is simply an extended, non-thinking thing. And accordingly, it is certain that I am really distinct from my body and can exist without it (AT VII 78; CSM II 54).²⁵

From a clear and distinct perception of P, we can infer that P is at least possible; that is, we have a clear and distinct perception of our mind existing apart from body, and thus we

²³ See Curley, 'Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths', p. 572.

²⁴ See AT VII 116–9; CSM II 83–5 and AT VII 78; CSM II 54, for instance.

²⁵ See also *Principles* I 60 (AT VIII 28–9; CSM I 213).

know that it is possible that they exist apart; hence, there is a real distinction between them. This argument is merely an application of the important truth rule previously discussed. But, as Bennett rightfully points out, Descartes would be ridiculously understating his position in the real distinction argument if he in fact held UP.²⁶ There would be no need for the truth rule in this argument if UP is true because, if everything is possible, then not only what I clearly and distinctly perceive is possible, but also whatever I perceive confusedly and obscurely is possible. We can formulate this objection as the following argument:

- (a) If Descartes held UP, then the real distinction argument does not require the truth rule.
- (b) The real distinction argument does require the truth rule.
- (c) Therefore, it is not the case that Descartes held UP.

We can see that this objection can be formulated using any of Descartes's important arguments that rely on the truth rule.

Thus, there are reasons why UP has been called 'the extreme reading' of Descartes's Creation Doctrine. If UP is a correct interpretation of the Creation Doctrine, then it is a disaster for the cogito, the truth rule, the *a priori* physics, the ontological argument, the argument for the real distinction of mind and body, and even the argument that God is not a deceiver (after all, God would be a deceiver if he has given us minds that are not reliable indicators of modal truth even when we clearly and distinctly understand something to be necessary or impossible). In other words, almost every positive step made in the Meditations is undermined by the Creation Doctrine *if it entails UP*. For all these reasons, and another to be discussed shortly, we should reject the idea that the Creation Doctrine entails UP unless we are absolutely forced to admit it.

I.3 Limited Possibilism

The second interpretation of Descartes's Creation Doctrine and its implications for modality, which attributes Limited Possibilism (LP) to Descartes, is primarily an attempt to understand (3) in such a way that Descartes can consistently hold (1) and (2). That is, it acknowledges that Descartes held that there are some necessary truths despite the fact that they are freely created by God. The LP thesis is the weaker thesis that *for any proposition P, it is possible that P is possible*. LPers, such as Peter Geach and Edwin Curley attribute LP to Descartes primarily on the basis of the following important passage from the 2 May 1644 letter to Mesland:

[T]he power of God cannot have any limits, and . . . our mind is finite and so created as to be able to conceive as possible the things which God has wished to be in fact possible, but not be able to conceive as possible things which God could have made possible, but which he nevertheless wished to make impossible . . . And even though

²⁶ Bennett, 'Descartes's Theory of Modality', p. 644.

[*encore que*] God has willed that some truths should be necessary, this does not mean that he willed them necessarily; for it is one thing to will that they be necessary, and quite another to will this necessarily, or to be necessitated to will it (AT IV 118–9; CSMK 235, my emphasis).

LPers take Descartes to be making an important scope distinction here between LP1 and LP2:

LP1: God wills that necessarily $2+2=4$.

LP2: Necessarily, God wills that $2+2=4$.

LP1, according to Curley (and presumably, Geach), is true, as is clear in the letter to Mesland quoted above. However, Descartes believes that LP2 is false, as the same passage indicates, precisely because avoidance of any determination of God's will is one of the motivations for the Creation Doctrine.²⁷

LPers take the passage from the Mesland letter to show that Descartes' eternal truths are necessary, but they are only *contingently* necessary because it is not necessary that God will them. As Geach states:

[the eternal truths] are necessary in our world, and in giving us our mental endowments God gave us the right sort of clear and distinct ideas to see the necessity. But though they are necessary, they are not necessarily necessary; God could have freely chosen to make a different sort of world, in which other things would have been necessary truths.²⁸

So, LP is not, like UP, a denial that there are any necessary truths; it is a denial that the necessary eternal truths are *necessarily necessary*.

The most significant advantage of LP over UP is that LP interprets (3) as entailing the more congenial (4*):

(4*) For any eternal truth P, it is possible that not-P is possible.

So, although LPers hold that the eternal truths are not necessarily necessary, they do hold that they are necessary. As Curley states, 'Descartes wants to allow that there are some propositions which are in fact impossible, but which might have been possible, and that others are in fact necessary, but might, nevertheless, not have been necessary'²⁹ and '[LP] is consistent with holding that there are some necessary truths, whereas [UP] denies this'.³⁰ Thus, if Descartes's Creation Doctrine entails LP, then he can consistently hold both (1) and (2).

Although Geach was the first to suggest that Descartes' Creation Doctrine entails LP, Curley is primarily responsible for the development of the idea, and he has formulated an argument to show that Descartes is committed to LP. Curley's primary concern is to show

²⁷ See the 27 May 1630 letter to Mersenne (AT I 152; CSMK 25).

²⁸ Peter Geach, 'Omnipotence', *Philosophy* 48 (1973), p. 10.

²⁹ Curley, 'Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths', pp. 582–3.

³⁰ Curley, 'A God Who Can Do All Things', Unpublished Manuscript (1998), 14.

how even a contingent act of willing can have a necessary truth as its object. Let 'W' denote the two-place relation ' wills that ', 'a' and 'p' are variables ranging over agents and propositions respectively, 'g' refers to God, and '→' is entailment. Curley's argument can be reconstructed as follows:

*Curley's LP Argument*³¹

- | | | |
|-----|---|---|
| C1. | $\forall a \forall p (Wap \rightarrow \diamond \sim Wap)$ | |
| C2. | $\forall p (p \leftrightarrow Wgp)$ | |
| C3. | $\Box p$ | assumption |
| C4. | $\Box p \rightarrow Wg\Box p$ | from C2 |
| C5. | $Wg\Box p \rightarrow \diamond \sim Wg\Box p$ | from C1 |
| C6. | $\diamond \sim Wg\Box p$ | from C3, C4, C5 |
| C7. | $\diamond \sim \Box p$ | from principle that $(p \rightarrow q) \rightarrow (\diamond \sim q \rightarrow \diamond \sim p)$ |
| C8. | $\forall p (\Box p \rightarrow \diamond \sim \Box p)$ | from C3–C7 |
| C9. | $\forall p \sim \Box \Box p$ | (or equivalently, $\forall p \diamond \diamond p$) |

C1 is the crucial premise in this argument. It simply states a common view that, in any genuinely contingent act of willing, it is possible that the agent refrains from willing what she in fact wills. And C2 is simply a statement of God's omnipotence. The rest of the argument basically follows from those two premises and the assumption C3. Curley took this argument to show that even in the realm of free acts of will, necessary truths may be the objects or results of those acts. However, it remains that their necessity is merely contingent precisely because God freely wills them to be necessary.

Before I examine the problems that plague LP as an interpretation of Descartes, it is interesting to note, as both Plantinga and Curley do, that LP is independently more plausible than UP as a general thesis about modality regardless of whether it is correct as an interpretation of Descartes.³² There are some systems of modal logic in which ($\Box P$ and $\diamond \diamond \sim P$) may be true. Take the actual world, @, and two other possible worlds w_1 and w_2 . In systems of modal logic in which there is a limitation on the accessibility relation among worlds, $\Box P$ is true iff P is true at all worlds accessible to @. Suppose that $\Box P$ is true at @, and that only w_1 and itself are accessible to @. This means that P is true at @ and w_1 . But suppose that w_2 is accessible to w_1 but not to @. If $\sim P$ is true at w_2 , then $\diamond \sim P$ is true at w_1 ; and because $\diamond \diamond \sim P$ simply means that there is some world accessible to @ in which $\diamond \sim P$ is true and w_1 is accessible to @, $\diamond \diamond \sim P$ is true at @ even though $\Box P$ is also true at @. So, if the accessibility relation among worlds is *intransitive* and *symmetrical* (e.g., as in the Brouwerian system) ($\Box P$ & $\diamond \diamond \sim P$) can be true.³³ But as Curley notes, attributing *this* type

³¹ Here I represent Curley's argument faithfully. This means, among other things, that I have not corrected the mistake he makes in using 'p' as both a variable (in C1, C2, C8, and C9) and as a name (in C3–C7). See Curley, 'Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths', pp. 580–1.

³² Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?*; Curley, 'Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths'.

³³ See G.E. Hughes and Max Crosswell, *A New Introduction to Modal Logic* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 62–4.

of reasoning to Descartes would be anachronistic and, quite frankly, ridiculous. But simply taken on its own, LP has the advantage of relative plausibility over UP.

I.4. Problems with LP

Problem 1. The first problem with LP is that it seems to place unwarranted constraints on God's power. It is reasonable to suppose that Descartes held a Thomistic view of God's omnipotence, at least with respect to mere necessary conditions for omnipotence. That is, Descartes held T:

T: God can bring about any possible state of affairs.³⁴

Evidence that Descartes held T can be found in his *Notae in Programma quoddam*:

We should note that even though the rule 'Whatever we can conceive of can exist,' is my own, it is true only so long as we are dealing with a conception which is clear and distinct, a conception which embraces the possibility of the thing in question, since God can bring about whatever we clearly perceive to be possible (AT VIII 351–2; CSM I 299).

And in the 31 December 1640 letter to Mersenne: '[P]ossible existence is contained in everything which we clearly understand, because from the fact that we clearly understand something it follows that it can be created by God' (AT III 274; CSMK 166). If God could not bring about a possible state of affairs, then he would not be omnipotent. This seems to be a very reasonable condition on God's omnipotence. But if LP is true, then God would not be omnipotent (if T provides a necessary condition for his omnipotence). Here is the reason. Take any eternal truth P. According to LP, *it is not possible that not-P*, although *it is possible that not-P is possible*. Without looking too far beneath the surface, we may see that LP already places restrictions on God's power, i.e., he cannot will that P is true. However, *prima facie*, this does not appear to be an unreasonable constraint. The implication of LP that there are some necessary eternal truths makes it the case that God cannot bring about the negation of P, despite his ability to bring about the *possibility* of the negation of P. So, an LPer would hold the following proposition:

LP3: For any eternal truth P, God could have made it possible that not-P is true.

And God is omnipotent. Let's suppose that he chooses to will *that it is possible that not-P* is true. Thus, according to LP, God can perform the incredibly difficult task of willing a necessary truth to be possibly false, but (and here is the rub) he cannot perform the relatively simple task of willing that *possibly* false proposition to be *actually* false. This

³⁴ T, of course, must be qualified. Descartes holds that God is immutable, and this may prevent him from bringing about some possible states of affairs; that is, if God wills from eternity that a certain proposition will be true at a certain time, then although the negation of this proposition is possible, God cannot bring it about because he is immutable. Nevertheless, God has the *power* to bring it about; he cannot bring it about because of his immutability. See the 15 April 1630 letter to Mersenne (AT I 145–6; CSMK 23).

case violates T, and T is a weak condition for omnipotence and one which Descartes held.³⁵

Problem 2. LP also makes the Creation Doctrine something much weaker than the doctrine Descartes actually held. Descartes, as we have seen, held that there are *no* limitations to which eternal truths God could have created. God is responsible not only for the modal status of a proposition but also for its *truth value*. As Descartes states in the Sixth Replies: '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' (AT VII 432; CSM II 291). It is LP's neglect of this consideration that leads to another objection. Recently, James Van Cleve has argued (successfully, according to Curley³⁶) that from reasoning quite similar to Curley's *and* the idea that not just the modal status but also the truth of any proposition is willed by God, we can show that the Creation Doctrine entails UP and not LP; hence, LP is not a genuine interpretive option.³⁷

Van Cleve asks us to consider the following argument, which is quite similar to Curley's LP Argument, with the main difference being that Van Cleve substitutes V2 for Curley's C2.

Van Cleve's Argument³⁸

- | | | |
|-----|---|--|
| V1. | $\forall a \forall p (Wap \rightarrow \diamond \sim Wap)$ | |
| V2. | $\forall p (\Box p \supset [p \rightarrow Wgp])$ | |
| V3. | $\Box p$ | Assumption |
| V4. | $p \rightarrow Wgp$ | from V2 and V3 |
| V5. | $Wgp \rightarrow \diamond \sim Wgp$ | from V1 |
| V6. | $\diamond \sim Wgp$ | V3–V5 |
| V7. | $\diamond \sim p$ | V4, V6, and principle that $[(p \rightarrow q) \rightarrow (\diamond \sim q \rightarrow \diamond \sim p)]$ |
| V8. | $\forall p (\Box p \supset \diamond \sim p)$ | V3–V7 |
| V9. | $\forall p \sim \Box p$ | (or equivalently, $\forall p \diamond p$) |

Van Cleve strangely provides a passage from the 6 May 1630 letter to Mersenne as textual evidence for V2: 'As for the eternal truths, I say once more that they are true or possible only because he knows them as true or possible . . . In God willing and knowing are a single thing . . .' (AT I 149; CSMK 24). This passage does not seem to suggest V2 but rather V2* and V2**.

- V2*: $\forall p (p \rightarrow Wgp)$
 V2**: $\forall p (\diamond p \rightarrow Wg \diamond p)$

So, the textual evidence for V2 is weak, but V2 is not required for Van Cleve's argument. He can use the more textually-supported V2* in conjunction with an

³⁵ Plantinga and Bennett both notice this bizarre consequence.

³⁶ See Curley, 'A God Who Can Do All Things'.

³⁷ James Van Cleve, 'Descartes and the Destruction of the Eternal Truths', *Ratio* 7 (1994), pp. 58–62.

³⁸ Van Cleve also makes Curley's mistake of using 'p' as both a variable and as a name.

uncontroversial principle stating that $\Box p \rightarrow p$ to arrive at his conclusion.³⁹ In any case, Van Cleve makes his point: the Creation Doctrine does not entail LP, but rather UP *if* Curley's C1 is true and God wills the truth of any proposition.

II. Leibnizianism and an Internal Problem for UP and LP

Unfortunately for LPers, LP (as an interpretation of Descartes), even if it can be defended against the problems raised in the previous section, is still plagued by the same major problem as UP (as an interpretation of Descartes): both understand (3) to entail the *possibility* of the eternal truths being otherwise. But the thrust of the Creation Doctrine is that *nothing* is possible prior to God's willing it to be so.⁴⁰

Although Descartes's Creation Doctrine is primarily a reaction to the late medieval and sixteenth-century scholastic debate concerning the essences of creatures and the eternal truths concerning them and whether they enjoy real *esse in se* independent of God,⁴¹ the problem with LP and UP can be illustrated most effectively by contrasting Descartes's Creation Doctrine with Leibniz's view of the eternal truths and their relation to God. Leibniz holds, just as strongly as Descartes, that the eternal truths and the essences of creatures depend on God. In fact, in section 44 of the *Monadology*, Leibniz goes so far as to give an argument for the existence of God based on the fact that the eternal truths depend on Him. However, one point on which they disagree is the nature of this dependence. Both Descartes and Leibniz hold the relatively weak thesis that the eternal truths would not be true if, *per impossibile*, God were not to exist. The difference is that Leibniz believes that the eternal truths exist in and depend on God's *understanding* but not God's will.⁴²

³⁹ In fact, Van Cleve uses the principle $\Box p \rightarrow p$ to get V6. So, it is strange that he did not go the direction I suggest.

⁴⁰ Lilli Alanen and Richard LaCroix make similar points. See Alanen, 'Descartes, Omnipotence, and Kinds of Modality' in P.H. Hare (ed.), *Doing Philosophy Historically* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1988), pp. 182–96; Richard LaCroix, 'Descartes on God's Ability to Do the Logically Impossible', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 14 (1984), pp. 455–75.

⁴¹ See, for example, Norman Wells, 'Capreolus on Essence and Existence', *The Modern Schoolman* 38 (1960), pp. 1–24; Wells, 'Descartes and the Scholastics Briefly Revisited', *New Scholasticism* 35 (1961), pp. 172–90; Wells, 'Suarez on the Eternal Truths', *The Modern Schoolman* 58 (1981), pp. 73–104, pp. 159–74; John Doyle, 'Suarez on the Reality of the Possibles', *The Modern Schoolman* 45 (1967), pp. 29–48; Peter Dear, *Mersenne and the Learning of the Schools* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988); Margaret Osler, *Divine Will and the Mechanical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Timothy Cronin, 'Eternal Truths in the Thought of Descartes and His Adversary', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 4 (1960), pp. 553–9; Cronin, *Objective Being in Descartes and Suarez*.

⁴² As R.S. Woolhouse states: 'though it is clear that immutable essences and natures would have no existence were it not for God, and though it is clear that their existence is independent of the rest of creation, Descartes does not say where they exist. For Leibniz, on the other hand, it is clear that they exist *in* the divine mind'. R.S. Woolhouse, 'Spinoza and Descartes and the Existence of Extended Substance' in Jan Cover and Mark Kulstad (eds.), *Central Themes in Early Modern Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1990), p. 37. Although Woolhouse's statement concerning Leibniz is uncontroversial, his comment about Descartes has been called into question by at least three papers in recent years: Tad Schmaltz, 'Platonism and Descartes' View of Immutable Essences', *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 73 (1991), pp. 129–70; Vere Chappell, 'Descartes's Ontology', *Topoi* 16 (1997), pp. 111–27; and Lawrence Nolan, 'The Ontological Status of Cartesian Natures', *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 78 (1997), pp. 169–94.

God's understanding is the realm of eternal truths . . . without him there would be nothing real in possibles, and not only would nothing exist, but also nothing would be possible . . . However, we should not imagine, as some do, that since the eternal truths depend on God, they are arbitrary and depend on his will, as Descartes appears to have held . . . [N]ecessary truths depend solely on his understanding, and are its internal object.⁴³

And in the *Theodicy*, he states

One must not say with some Scotists, that the eternal truths would exist even though there were no understanding, not even that of God. For it is, in my judgment, the divine understanding which gives reality to the eternal truths, albeit God's will have no part therein.⁴⁴

These very truths can have no existence without an understanding to take cognizance of them; for they would not exist if there were no divine understanding wherein they are realized, so to speak.⁴⁵

Descartes, despite holding that the eternal truths depend on God, cannot accept that they depend on his understanding but not his will. Rather, they depend on the divine understanding and the divine will. The reason is that Descartes holds the Doctrine of Divine Simplicity: God does not have any parts or composition. Hence, the divine understanding and the divine will are identical: 'In God willing and knowing are a single thing' (AT I 149; CSMK 24); '[F]rom eternity he willed and understood them [i.e., the eternal truths] to be, and by that very fact he created them . . . In God, willing, understanding and creating are the same thing without one being prior to the other even conceptually [*ne quidem ratione*]' (AT I 152–3; CSMK 25–6). So, holding that the eternal truths are the object of God's understanding but not of his will is not an option open to Descartes.

Furthermore, and more importantly for the present discussion, Descartes, unlike Leibniz, does not allow that *anything* is true or possible prior to God's decision to make it true or possible.⁴⁶ Take any eternal truth P willed by God to be (necessarily) true. Descartes thinks that God could have willed not-P to be true; that is, he *does* hold that (3) is true. However, we cannot infer from (3) that not-P is *possible*, and here is why. A prominent feature (indeed the characteristic feature) of the Creation Doctrine is that *a proposition is true only if God wills it to be true*; and Descartes believes that this holds equally for modal propositions (i.e., propositions with a modal term). As he states in the 2 May 1644 letter to Mesland, we can 'conceive as possible the things which God has wished to be in fact possible' (AT IV 118; CSMK 235), and more explicitly in *Principles* I 24, he states: 'God alone is the true cause of everything which is or *can be* [*omnium quae sunt aut possunt esse*]' (AT VIII 14; CSM I 201, emphasis mine). God is the efficient cause of everything that actually or possibly exists and of everything that is

⁴³ 'Monadology', §43, in Loemker, *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, p. 647.

⁴⁴ Leibniz, *Theodicy*, p. 243 (section 184).

⁴⁵ Leibniz, *Theodicy*, p. 246 (section 189).

⁴⁶ Obviously, I am not speaking of temporal priority here because Descartes holds that the eternal truths are *eternal* and immutable. So, there was no time at which they were not true. See AT IV 314; CSMK 272.

actually or possibly true. But it is not the case that God ever willed that *it is possible that not-P* or that *it is possible that not-P is possible*. We know Descartes believes this because he believes that the eternal truths are willed to be (necessarily) true from eternity, i.e., there is no time at which they are not true.⁴⁷ So, because God never willed that *it is possible that not-P* or *it is possible that not-P is possible*, those propositions are not true, nor were they ever true. Thus, Descartes's Creation Doctrine entails neither UP nor LP because to do so would require that there be true modal propositions prior to God's creative will; and that is clearly not allowed by the Creation Doctrine. Thus, we must look for a way to understand (3) within the confines of the Creation Doctrine, that is, in a way that doesn't presuppose possibilities independent of God's will.

We can now see also that C1 in Curley's LP Argument and V1 in Van Cleve's Argument are false. The premises *may* be true only if the domain of the quantifier included only finite created agents. But Descartes is explicit about one of his personal motivations concerning the Creation Doctrine: 'I want people to get used to speaking of God in a manner worthier, I think, than the common and almost universal way of imagining him as a finite being' (AT I 146; CSMK 23). Although finite agents may require alternative possibilities in order to have freedom of will, God, being infinite and absolutely independent of all things, does not require this.

III. Understanding the 'Could' in Terms of Indifference

I understand that there may be some confusion, and it seems warranted. After all, it is not obvious how we are supposed to understand (3) without presupposing possibilities, and yet we must have an adequate grasp of the sense of the 'could' in (3) in order to make sense of the Creation Doctrine. We usually think that the fact that an agent could have willed a state of affairs α entails that there are possible alternatives among which is α . I admit that this may ordinarily be the case,⁴⁸ but we cannot forget that we are talking about God here; and divine freedom is quite different from human freedom for Descartes. Descartes states the difference in the Sixth Replies:

As for the freedom of the will, the way in which it exists in God is quite different from the way in which it exists in us. It is self-contradictory to suppose that the will of God was not indifferent from eternity with respect to everything which has happened or will ever happen because 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 of 'rationally determined reason' [*ratione ratiocinata*] as they call it, such that God's idea of the good *impelled* him to choose one thing rather than another. For example, God did not will . . . that the three angles of a triangle should be equal to two right angles because he recognized that it could not be otherwise, and so on. On the contrary, . . . it is because he willed that the three angles of a triangle should necessarily equal two right angles that this is

⁴⁷ See AT I 152–3; CSMK 25–6.

⁴⁸ We should remember that even Frankfurt states that it is only *ordinarily* the case that a 'could' entails possibility.

true and cannot be otherwise . . . Thus, the supreme indifference to be found in God is the supreme indication of his omnipotence (AT VII 431–2; CSM II 291–2, emphasis mine).

Absolute indifference is a necessary condition of *divine* freedom, despite the fact that Descartes holds that indifference is the ‘lowest grade of (human) freedom’ (AT VII 58; CSM II 40).⁴⁹ According to Descartes, unless God were indifferent in his willing, he would have been *impelled* or *determined* (by virtue of his wisdom, goodness, and simplicity) to will exactly those things that are true (and/or good).⁵⁰ But Descartes thinks that the only way God’s will could be absolutely indifferent is if there can be nothing true prior to his decree to make it true. As Descartes states, if someone ‘always saw clearly what was true . . . it would be impossible . . . ever to be in a state of indifference’ (AT VII 58; CSM II 40). Because God, by his very nature, would know what is true if there were anything true independent of his will, his will would not be indifferent and hence not (divinely) free.

If we concentrate on the fact that Descartes’s Creation Doctrine is not primarily a thesis about modality, but rather about the dependence of everything, including the eternal truths, on God’s independent and indifferent will, we can finally see how Descartes understood (3) in such a way that he consistently held (1) and (2). I propose that the following is the way that Descartes intended (3) to be understood:

(3*) For any eternal truth P, it is not the case that there were any independent factors preventing God from willing not-P or impelling him to will P.

(3*) has the advantage that it doesn’t entail anything about the possibility (or possible possibility) of not-P. Thus, it satisfies the constraint that even possibilities require God’s willing them to be so. But this advantage is worthless if (3*) is not something that Descartes actually believed. Fortunately, (3*) is supported by strong textual evidence. In the long quotation from the Sixth Replies above, I emphasised Descartes’s statement that God’s will cannot be impelled or determined by something independent of his will; and it is in this lack of determination that God’s indifferent freedom consists. Evidence for (3*) is also found in the 1630 letters to Mersenne and the 1644 letter to Mesland, where Descartes states that God was not necessitated nor was he determined to will what he in fact willed.⁵¹ Even the passages (incorrectly) used by Frankfurt to support the UP interpretation of the Creation Doctrine support (3*). For example: ‘[T]he power of God cannot have any limits . . . God cannot have been *determined* to make it true that contradictories cannot be true together . . .’ (AT IV 118; CSMK 235, my emphasis).

It is also clear that Descartes means that these limits or factors cannot be *independent* of God’s will. In the Fifth Replies, Descartes states that God can have limits *self-imposed* by immutably willing from eternity that certain propositions are necessarily true: ‘But just as the poets suppose that the Fates were originally established by Jupiter, but that after they were established he bound himself to abide by them, so I do not think that the

⁴⁹ See AT VII 433; CSM II 292.

⁵⁰ See AT VII 435–6; CSM II 293–4.

⁵¹ AT I 152; CSMK 25, AT IV 118; CSMK 235.

essences of things, and the mathematical truths which we can know concerning them, are independent of God' (AT VII 380; CSM II 261). *Prima facie*, this passage is in stark contrast with something Descartes states in the 15 April 1630 letter to Mersenne, and as such it may appear that Descartes is being inconsistent with his metaphors. The passage is as follows: 'Indeed to say that these [eternal] 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' (AT I 145; CSMK 23). In this passage, Descartes explicitly contrasts the fact that God is independent of all things with the fact that the gods of the ancients were subject to independent factors. Descartes seems to be stating that God is radically dissimilar from Jupiter and Saturn. But what he is actually doing is stating that they are dissimilar insofar as the latter are constrained by ('subject to') things external and independent of them; whereas in the Fifth Replies passage quoted above, Descartes is stating that God is similar to Jupiter insofar as both act in accordance with self-imposed restrictions. This is consistent with God's creation being absolutely indifferent, and with the Creation Doctrine.

In addition to the textual evidence for (3*), the restrictions that The Creation Doctrine imposes on an interpretation of (3) (e.g., that we cannot employ unwilled possibilities in our interpretation) means that there is an extreme scarcity of interpretive options. Because (3*) has so much in its favour (i.e., it allows Descartes to hold both (1) and (2), and it is well supported by the text), and there is no clear alternative interpretation of (3) to which we can help ourselves, we would be wise to accept (3*) as the correct interpretation of (3).

IV. A Brief Remark on the Present Interpretation and Descartes's Modal Epistemology

Some readers may still be confused. Descartes is saying that there are things that God could have willed even though these things are not possible; and this strikes us as incomprehensible.⁵² After all, we may wonder *how* any agent, human or divine, could have willed something that was not-possible. But Descartes is quick to point out that our inability to conceive the lack of any external limitations on God's will should come as no surprise. In many passages, Descartes emphasises the incomprehensibility of God's will. For instance, in the Sixth Replies, he states: 'There is no need to ask how God could have brought it about from eternity that it was not true that twice four make eight, and so on; for I admit that this is unintelligible to us (AT VII 436; CSM II 294). And in the 2 May 1644 letter to Mesland, he states: '[E]ven if this be true [i.e., that God could have willed otherwise], we should not try to comprehend it, since our nature is incapable of doing so' (AT IV 118; CSMK 235). It is precisely the fact that God created *everything* (except himself, of course) arbitrarily, with absolute indifference and without pre-existing possibilities, that makes him 'a being who is infinite and beyond our grasp . . . whose power surpasses the bounds of human understanding' (AT I 150; CSMK 24–5).⁵³

⁵² Although Descartes thinks that God could have done the not-possible, he does not think that God can do the impossible. In a June 1642 letter to Regius, Descartes states: '[T]he only things that are said to be impossible for God to do are those which involve a conceptual contradiction, that is, which are not intelligible' (AT III 567; CSMK 214).

⁵³ See also AT I 146; CSMK 23.

How then does Descartes account for the fact that we do not have epistemic access to what God could have willed without making God out to be a deceiver? A problem with UP is that it entails an asymmetry between what is conceivable and what is possible; i.e., the range of possibilities is much broader than the range of what is conceivable by our finite minds. As Wilson states '[the Creation Doctrine] seems to lead to the conclusion that God could have made true what we cannot comprehend as possible'.⁵⁴ This poses problems for UP because Descartes does think that (clear and distinct) conceivability is a reliable guide to modality. This is a problem for UP but not for my interpretation. On my interpretation, Descartes can certainly hold that whatever is possible is, in principle, conceivable and vice versa,⁵⁵ despite the truth of each of the following:

- (5) God could have willed *that* $2+2=5$ is true.⁵⁶
- (6) Humans cannot conceive *that* $2+2=5$ is true.
- (7) Humans cannot conceive *that* $2+2=5$ is possibly true.

If UP is true and the 'could' entails possibility, then we encounter the problem that conceivability is not a reliable guide to modality. This is because of (6) and (7) and the fact that UPers take (5) to entail *that it is possible that* $2+2=5$. However, on my interpretation, even though (5) is true, (8) is also true:

- (8) It is not possible *that* $2+2=5$ is true.

(8) is true for the reason previously stated that (9):

- (9) It is possible *that* $2+2=5$

was never willed by God to be true; and, as we have seen, being willed by God is a necessary condition for the truth of any proposition according to the Creation Doctrine. Thus, the truth of (8) accounts for the reason why (6) and (7) are true, despite the truth of (5). We cannot conceive *that* $2+2=5$ because it is not possibly true.

⁵⁴ Wilson *Descartes*, p. 122.

⁵⁵ One may object that while Descartes did hold that whatever is clearly and distinctly conceivable is possible, he did not hold that whatever is possible is clearly and distinctly conceivable. For instance, the Trinity and the Incarnation are actual and hence possible, but they are not able to be clearly and distinctly conceived. (See, for instance, AT I 153; CSMK 26, AT III 215–16; CSMK 155, AT III 274; CSMK 166, AT III 544; CSMK 211, AT VIII B 169–70.) *De fide* truths seem to constitute a counterexample to the equivalence of conceivability and possibility. However, Descartes distinguishes between clearly and distinctly conceiving *that* P and clearly and distinctly conceiving *how* P could be the case. We can clearly and distinctly conceive *that* certain propositions concerning the Trinity and the Incarnation are true without conceiving *how* they can be true. So, *de fide* truths do not constitute a counter-example to the equivalence of conceivability and possibility.

⁵⁶ Where this claim is understood as an instance of (3*), namely as: it is not the case that there were any independent factors preventing God from willing that $2+2=5$ or impelling him to will *that* $2+2=4$.

Conclusion

We have seen that two prominent interpretations of Descartes ignore a fundamental feature of his Creation Doctrine, and, as a result, they arrive at bizarre conclusions concerning his views about modality. I realize that I have not made a positive case for the compatibility of (1) and (2). I have simply shown that they are not incompatible. However, with the threat of incompatibility eliminated, Descartes's texts are free to speak for themselves. A close reading shows that he consistently holds both (1) and (2).⁵⁷

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