

## God, The Evil Genius And Eternal Truths: The Structure Of The Understanding In The Cartesian Philosophy

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Descartes' *Meditationes de prima philosophia*, perhaps the most widely read text in philosophy,\* comes under scrutiny in every age and from every prejudice and point of view. Some would take it as the canonical text in the Cartesian architectonic, the authoritative statement of Cartesian philosophy. Martial Gueroult, finding in Descartes' philosophy a thoroughly unified and consistent system, regards the *Meditations* as its definitive statement. "...all interpretations of Cartesian metaphysics must rest above all on the little treatise of the *Meditations*."<sup>1</sup> Nothing must be interpreted to weaken its teachings, nothing essential is omitted and therefore whatever seems to augment can only be regarded as further implications or extensions but not properly accretions. "The *Meditations* is constantly invoked by Descartes, now as breviary, now as the truly demonstrative introduction to the whole of his philosophy ... it is on it that he comments to the end of his life without ever changing anything in it."<sup>2</sup>

Ferdinand Alqu  , Gueroult's contemporary, accords no privileged position to the *Meditations*. Rather he exhorts us to read the Cartesian texts, all the texts, in chronological order, imposing the rule "never to illumine a text through a text chronologically posterior, thus forcing oneself to read each work of Descartes as if one would ignore those which, in time, must follow."<sup>3</sup> More recently, the autonomy of the *Meditations*, its integrity and self-sufficiency, have been put to the question. As is observed, the edition of 1641 was not the simple text itself "in its terse, beautifully

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\* In accordance with current practice, I use the following abbreviations for the standard editions of Descartes' works:

AT -- Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, eds. *Oeuvres de Descartes*, 12 vols., Paris, 1974.

CB -- John Cottingham, trans., *Descartes' Conversation with Burman*, Oxford, 1976.

CSM -- John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vol. I and II, Cambridge, 1985.

CSMK -- John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, Anthony Kenny, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vol. III (The Correspondence), Cambridge, 1991.

<sup>1</sup> *Descartes selon l'ordre des raisons*, 2 vols., Paris, 1952, trans. Roger Ariew, *Descartes According to the Order of Reasons*, 2 vols., Minneapolis, 1984, Vol. I, 8.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *La D  couverte M  taphysique de l'Homme chez Descartes*, Paris, 1966 (1st ed. 1950), 10.

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wrought six movements" but "a compendium: introductory remarks that set the text in relation to questions already raised about the *Discourse* four years earlier, the six meditations themselves, and then objections from other scholars, together with the author's replies to those objections."<sup>4</sup> Jean-Luc Marion would find the integrity in just such a compendium:

... the strict corpus of the six meditations ought to be read, indissolubly, as an ensemble of replies to the scattered objections made to the *Discourse on Method* and as a text itself destined from the first - even before its (regular) publication - to be submitted to objections, to which Descartes would reply. Not only would it be illegitimate to read the *Meditations* in abstraction from the *Objections* and *Replies*, with which they intentionally form an organic whole, but it would also be wholly illegitimate to read them otherwise than as replies to the objections evoked by the *Discourse on Method*. Far from being soliloquy or solipsism, Cartesian thought, in so far as it obeys the logic of argumentation, is inscribed in its very origin in the responsorial space of dialogue.<sup>5</sup>

More troubling for a just appraisal of the purpose and import of the *Meditations* is the charge of subterfuge and insincerity: the work as read by some commentators does not represent Descartes' true doctrine and therefore is not to be taken at its word. Perhaps this misrepresentation is unintended and simply a function of having to express his thoughts in the language of medieval scholasticism, as Heidegger thought<sup>6</sup>; but perhaps there is a more sinister reason, a deliberate deception. Charles Adams, co-editor of *Oeuvres*, wrote that Descartes' metaphysics is "a drape to cover the goods",<sup>7</sup> that is, his scientific work; Stephen Gaukroger in his recent intellectual biography of Descartes holds that the *Meditations* is "subterfuge", not a genuine metaphysics but arguments for a particular audience, utilizing their categories and methods, for the purpose not of elucidation but

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<sup>4</sup> Roger Ariew and Marjorie Grene eds., *Descartes and his Contemporaries: Meditations, Objections, and Replies*, Chicago, 1995.

<sup>5</sup> "The *Objections* in Cartesian Metaphysics" in Ariew and Grene, 19-20. One is reminded here of the scholastic dialectic which reached full development in the literary form of *quaestiones*. Marion characterizes Descartes' argumentative technique as "theses, objections, replies", *ibid.*, n.26. Against this, Descartes reminds us, "this is why I wrote 'Meditations' rather than 'Disputations', as the philosophers have done, or 'Theorems and Problems', as the geometers would have done. In so doing I wanted to make it clear that I would have nothing to do with anyone who was not willing to join me in meditating and giving the subject attentive consideration." *Rep. II Obj.*, AT vii, 157; CSM, II, 112. Although *quaestiones* clearly differ from *disputationes*, the remarks of Descartes could apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to Marion's "theses, objections, replies" model. Interestingly, Stephen Gaukroger, "The Sources of Descartes' Procedure of Deductive Demonstration in Metaphysics and Natural Science" in John Cottingham ed., *Reason, Will and Sensation: Studies in Descartes' Metaphysics*, Oxford, 1994, 47-60, thinks Descartes' procedure has definite parallels with the *disputationes* model, in spite of Descartes' protestations.

<sup>6</sup> *Nietzsche IV*, trans. D.F. Krell, San Francisco, 1982, 115: "Again, Descartes himself offers a superficial and inadequate interpretation of *res cogitans*, inasmuch as he speaks the language of the doctrines of medieval scholasticism...", and other similar comments, *passim*.

<sup>7</sup> AT xii, 306.

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obfuscation.<sup>8</sup> Hiram Caton is far more severe: not only was Descartes' metaphysical justification of science redundant and hence was done only to secure the acceptance of an unsuspecting religious and political audience assumed to be hostile to it, but he actually employed arguments patently invalid to prove God's existence for the purpose of undermining the intellectual grounds for theism. To achieve this, Caton says, Descartes employs "double-talk" (mollifying the authorities in the language of their familiar prejudices while revealing its true meaning only to those strong minds for whom it was intended), dissimulation and the use of arguments which would conciliate Aristotelians while at the same time destroy the foundations of their philosophy.<sup>9</sup>

Finally there is Louis Loeb: more cautious than Caton, he recognizes the difficulties of sustaining an interpretation of a work under a hypothesis of dissimulation -- difficult, he grants, but not impossible. Writing under the assumption that Descartes is lying, he offers what he thinks is a coherent account under such an assumption. It begins with the observation that everyone admits, or should admit, the so-called "circle" in the proof that "what is clear and distinct is true", as well as the "notorious weakness" in the proofs for the existence of God in Meditation 3; then he adds the suggestion that Descartes was aware of the deficiencies in the argument, that is, that he didn't accept the proofs himself, and this because he saw no need of a guarantee that "what is clear and distinct is true". The two arguments for the existence of God in Meditation 3 were constructed simply as appeasement. Loeb's argument is intended to show that there can be a unified explanation under a dissimulation hypothesis, and thus to elevate, as he says, the dissimulation hypothesis as a legitimate interpretation of Descartes.<sup>10</sup> Although the interpretations of Caton and Loeb might seem extreme, it is commonplace to find elements of the 'dissimulation' hypothesis in current literature on Descartes, especially from those whose interest is in Descartes' scientific work, for frequently these scholars themselves see no need for a foundation for Descartes' scientific work.

But there are certain pertinent biographical details. In late 1630, Descartes wrote to Mersenne of a "little treatise of Metaphysics, which I began in Friesland, in which I set out principally to prove the existence of God and of our souls when they are separate from the body..."[To Mersenne, 25 Nov. 1630. CSMK 29; AT i, 182] This is the first extant reference to a metaphysical treatise, although earlier in the year he had written that all men have an obligation to use their reason principally to know God and to know themselves, and then he added, "That is the task with which I began my studies; and I can say that I would not have been able to discover the foundations of physics if I had not looked for them along this road."[To Mersenne, 15 Apr. 1630, CSMK 22, AT i, 144] Descartes' preoccupation with such metaphysical questions and its relation to his physics

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<sup>8</sup> *Descartes, an Intellectual Biography*, Oxford, 1995, 12.

<sup>9</sup> *The Origin of Subjectivity: an Essay on Descartes*, New Haven, 1973, Chap. 1 and 4, esp. 10-20, 104-8, 118-30.

<sup>10</sup> "Is there Radical Dissimulation in Descartes' *Meditations*?" in *Essays on Descartes' Meditations*, ed. A. Rorty, Berkeley, 1986, 243-270; and "Was Descartes Sincere in His Appeal to the Natural Light?", *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, Vol 26 (1988), 377-406.

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from at least 1630 is well documented.<sup>11</sup> Equally well known is his own exclusive engagement with mathematical and scientific work which he accomplished in relative obscurity prior to 1629. As he reports himself, "Those nine years [1619 - 1628] passed by, however, without my taking any side regarding the questions which are commonly debated among the learned, or beginning to search for the foundations of any philosophy more certain than the commonly accepted one." [*Discourse* III, CSM I, 126; AT vi, 30] What issue or problem, it might be asked, did he encounter which demanded as response the metaphysics which engaged him from 1629 or 1630?

There is also from this time Descartes' first statement of the "creation of eternal truths", in a letter to Mersenne, 15 April 1630: "In my treatise of physics I shall discuss a number of metaphysical topics and especially this: that the mathematical truths that you call eternal have been established by God and are completely dependent upon Him, just as any other of His creatures are."<sup>12</sup> As Emile Bréhier remarks in his analysis of the doctrine, Descartes first wanted Mersenne to "proclaim it everywhere", but when Mersenne reminded him that such a thesis would meet with opposition from theologians - there was thought to be a close connection between the question and the production of the Word --, Descartes thereafter suppressed it. "...not a word of it is breathed in the *Discourse*, not in the *Meditations* and *Principles*..."<sup>13</sup> In spite of its relative obscurity in the Cartesian corpus, it is a source of considerable debate and prominence in current Cartesian scholarship.

The "insincerity" thesis in all its forms presumes that Cartesian science needed no such foundation as Descartes is thought to have produced in the *Meditations*, either because it was thought to be already well-founded or because the *Meditations* as a philosophical work is itself a failure. Thus, a rehabilitation of the *Meditations* as authentic Cartesian philosophy must show what was wanting to Cartesian science prior to 1630 when Descartes first indicated he was engaged in "metaphysical studies"; it would show the deepening of the problem of a foundation for a science of nature in the full-blown doctrine of the "creation of eternal truths"; finally it would read the *Meditations* as engaged precisely in the solution of that problem, the *Meditations* providing the foundation for the structure and limits of human understanding. The work then would be seen in its true unity and as canonical -- all other enterprises coming from it as the tree from the roots.

### 1. The "Crisis" Of 1628-30

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<sup>11</sup> See Gaukroger, *an Intellectual Biography*, Chap. 6, "A New Beginning, 1629-30", esp. 195-203. Then there is Descartes' own account in *Discourse*: he reports that he settled in Holland "exactly eight years ago", that is, in early 1629, and he continues, "I do not know whether I should tell you of the first meditations that I had there..." CSM, 126; AT vi, 31.

<sup>12</sup> CSMK, 22-23; AT i, 145.

<sup>13</sup> "The Creation of Eternal Truths in Descartes's System" in Willis Doney, ed., *Descartes: a Collection of Critical Essays*, New York, 1967, 193.

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"Descartes was a scientist before he was a metaphysician"<sup>14</sup>-- an incontestable observation. But what moved Descartes from the study of music, mathematics, optics and mechanics to the study of God and the soul, the "metaphysical turn" as Hatfield calls it, is controversial. It had been assumed, following Richard Popkin's work, that Descartes was gripped by the threat of the *crise pyrrhoniennne*, the skepticism that was all around him in Paris in that period;<sup>15</sup> "...the evidence of the autobiographical sections of the *Discours* and of Descartes' letters, indicates that around 1628-9 he was struck by the full force of the skeptical onslaught, and the need for a new and stronger answer to it."<sup>16</sup> But Stephen Gaukroger's studies of the period reveal no such evidence of a concern with skepticism, either in accounts in the *Discours*, correspondence from the period or Descartes' interests and preoccupations before the 1630's.<sup>17</sup> Descartes was keenly interested in "certainty", which is the end of method in the *Regulae* as stated in its first rule; its two elements "intuition" and "deduction" are the mental activities which achieve certainty, and the primary objects of intuition and deduction are "simple natures" and their combinations.<sup>18</sup>

The *Regulae*, it is now conceded, was composed in stages between 1619 and 1628, stages in the text corresponding to the development of Descartes' thought requiring modification and reformulations of the text itself, especially in Rules 8 and 12 to 21.<sup>19</sup> These later modifications reflect a growing concern with a "universal mathematics" which would comprehend not only mathematical interests proper but "physico-mathematics" involving objects of his corpuscular-mechanical philosophy.<sup>20</sup> To achieve certainty, his method demanded that all be brought to intuitions of simple natures, but as soon as he tried to apply the method to physical phenomena, as for example the study of magnetism, the method failed him. The empirical element could not be confined wholly under the paradigm of mathematics.<sup>21</sup>

The later Rules also fail him in their application to the theory of algebraic equations, for in the *Regulae* he demanded an intuitive grounding of mathematics in the imagination,<sup>22</sup> as though all that can be thought in mathematics can be imagined. In Rule 18, for example, his expression of algebraic quantities is naively identified with geometrical figures such as lines, rectangles, squares. But these images, though easily pictured, allow no extension to higher powers or to the extraction of roots, matters which

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<sup>14</sup> Gary Hatfield begins his article, "Reason, Nature, and God in Descartes" in Stephen Voss, ed., *Essays on the Philosophy and Science of René Descartes*, Oxford, 1993, 259-287, with this sentence.

<sup>15</sup> *The History of Skepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza*, Berkeley, 1979, Chap. IX.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 174. But the passage Popkin quotes from the *Discours*, although it mentions the immunity of the *cogito* argument to skeptical attack, is not primarily *contra Academicos*.

<sup>17</sup> Gaukroger, *Intellectual Biography*, 12, 184. Hatfield concurs: "And although Descartes no doubt was pleased that his *Meditations* contained an answer to skepticism, answering the skeptics was the least of his concerns.", *op.cit.*, 261.

<sup>18</sup> *Regulae*, Rules 3, 6, 12.

<sup>19</sup> John A Schuster, "Descartes' *Mathesis Universalis*: 1619-28, in Stephen Gaukroger, ed., *Descartes: Philosophy, Mathematics and Physics*, Sussex, 42.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 73-74.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 74-75.

<sup>22</sup> "Pictorial vividness" is a crucial element in Descartes' account of "clear and evident intuitions" in the *Regulae*. Cf. Gaukroger, *Intellectual Biography*, 123f, 176ff.

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are completely revised and accommodated in his *Géométrie* of 1637. The inadequacy of the later *Regulae* is evident finally in the manner in which it ends abruptly with the mere titles of Rules 19 to 21, just as Descartes was about to begin a treatment of a theory of equations.<sup>23</sup>

The *Regulae* is concerned simply with 'certainty' and produces a "way of clear and distinct ideas".<sup>24</sup> But is this enough? Those who hold to the "dissimulation thesis" implicitly think it is sufficient, since they regard doubt about Descartes' scientific procedure and any attempt to overturn the doubt mere elements of the strategy to camouflage his atheistic, materialistic physics. But the "way of clear and distinct ideas" of the *Regulae* was showing cracks. Its abandonment in the late 1620's (and he never returns to it again) was not a ruse but an impasse. Gaukroger notes that Descartes' interest in mathematics greatly diminished, and even though he returned to it to produce the *Geometry*, his principal work had already been done.<sup>25</sup> Beeckman reports that when Descartes visited him in October, 1628, Descartes said that he had nothing more to accomplish in arithmetic and geometry, having done in the previous nine years all that was humanly possible.[AT x, 331] And on 15 April 1630, he wrote to Mersenne, "As for Problems [i.e. mathematical problems], I would send you a million to propose to others if you desire it; but I am so tired of mathematics and now hold it in so low esteem that I could no longer bother to solve them myself." [AT i, 139]

The *Regulae* was not enough for Descartes: the "way of clear and distinct ideas" was not a sufficient foundation for his scientific work, both because its uncritical application to a natural world with an empirical element did not work, revealing the need for a firmer foundation than mathematical certainty, and because a mathematics grounded in the imagination failed him, undermining his confidence and interest in what formerly had been the paradigm of clear and distinct knowledge. Descartes was now confronting the empirical, and would soon recognize that mathematical certainty was itself not enough for truth.

### 2. The Creation Of Eternal Truths

The initial statement of the theory of "the creation of eternal truths" in the letter of 15 April 1630 reflects on God as lawgiver: God establishes mathematical truths in nature after the manner of a king laying down laws for his kingdom. They depend on Him no less than the rest of his creation. But our relation to these truths is quite otherwise: there is no single one that we cannot grasp if our minds turn to consider it, for they are all inborn in our minds, much as a king would imprint his laws in the hearts of his subjects if he had the power to do so. "But" one might ask "could He not change these eternal truths as the king might change the laws of his kingdom?" Only if God's will can change, and we understand God's will to be eternal and unchanging. God's will is indeed free and his

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<sup>23</sup> Schuster. 77-8.

<sup>24</sup> Gaukroger, *Intellectual Biography*, uses this phrase. The *Regulae* speaks of "intuiting the truth distinctly and clearly" (Rule 9) and "clear and distinct propositions" (Rule 11).

<sup>25</sup> *Intellectual Biography*, 180.

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power beyond our grasp.[AT i, 145-6] In this first statement mathematical truths are understood as the products of God's absolute power, and from that side God is above everything and is absolutely free.<sup>26</sup> Taking this element by itself, one might conclude that Descartes is a voluntarist.<sup>27</sup> But such an interpretation is hard to sustain in the face of the other side, for the eternal truths are wholly necessary for our understanding, and possess an immutability and eternity from the divine immutability itself.<sup>28</sup>

The doctrine on the surface is theological (Descartes calls it 'metaphysical', which it is). It is an explicit reaction to two positions concerning eternal truths which were then current and known to him. Cardinal Bérulle, founder of the Oratory, he who had been impressed at hearing Descartes and had encouraged his research<sup>29</sup>, reviver of such Augustinian doctrines as the need for divine illumination, used that doctrine to explain the nature of eternal truths: they emanate from God as rays from the sun. In the subsequent letter to Mersenne, Descartes expressly rejects that position: "I do not conceive [eternal truths] as emanating from God like rays from the sun." [To Mersenne, 27 May 1630, CSMK 25; AT i, 152] It is abundantly clear why he must reject this view when his thoughts achieve philosophical expression, for eternal truths depend on God for their truth and could never themselves be used, as they were in St. Augustine, as grounds for affirming God's existence.<sup>30</sup> As he explained in the same letter, eternal truths are true or possible only because God knows them as true or possible; they are in no way true independently of Him. Then he add the rich theological statement that in God will and knowing are one thing "in such a way that by the very fact of willing something [God] knows it, and it is only for this reason that it is true." [To Mersenne, 6 May 1630, CSMK 24; AT i, 149] "In God willing, understanding and creating are all the same thing without one being prior to the other even conceptually." [CSMK 25-6; AT i, 153] This being the case, the immutability of the eternal truths is well-founded: if God's will could change, then the divine understanding, one with the divine will, would also change; that is, the divine understanding would have earlier been in error, or at least incomplete.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. Margaret Osler, *Divine Will and the Mechanical Philosophy*, Cambridge, 1994, whose evidence and argument I follow here.

<sup>27</sup> Gaukroger, *Intellectual Biography*, 206, interprets Descartes as having "an extreme view of God's powers", which would support a view of God as completely transcendent. "What was at stake was not the existence of God *per se*, even the God of Christianity, but whether there was a compelling form of rational argument, independent of faith, which showed the existence of the *right kind* of God." (p.196), a God who is not tied in any way to His creation. This is assuredly interpreting Descartes as a voluntarist

<sup>28</sup> Osler uses the medieval distinction of the absolute and ordained powers of God to characterize Descartes' views. She says, p. 130, "It is with regard to his ordained power that Descartes was an intellectualist: he accepted the existence of some necessity in the world, something that voluntarists could never accept because of their emphasis on the utter contingency of the world."

<sup>29</sup> Both were present at a lecture given by an alchemist, Chandoux, where Descartes attacked the speaker and the audience who applauded his views, for being willing to accept probability as the new standard of truth. The original account of the lecture and Descartes' response is given by his early biographer Baillet, and recounted in Popkin, 174.

<sup>30</sup> See my " 'Si enim fallor, sum': the Logic of Certainty in St. Augustine and Descartes", *Proceedings of Ninth International Congress of Patristic Studies*, Oxford, 1983.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Osler, 131.

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Mathematical truths are described as perfectly comprehensible to a finite understanding, thus not in content superior to human thought. But God, infinite, eternal, immutable, creator of all things, is spoken of as "cause whose incomprehensible power surpasses the bounds of human understanding". This recognition of the complete disparity of eternal, mathematical truths and the divine "cause" of those truths signifies an absolute break with the Neo-Platonic past which saw essences of created things as 'participations' of the divine essence and these truths as 'attenuations' of the divine understanding, where God, in contemplating them, does nothing but contemplate Himself. This account reigned for well over a thousand years - we find it from St. Augustine<sup>32</sup> to Bérulle<sup>33</sup> - and Descartes here sweeps it away.

The other view of eternal truths which Descartes rejected was more extreme, the position of Suarez: "These propositions are not true because they are known by God, but rather they are only known by God because they are true, independently of whether one could explain why God knows them to be true."<sup>34</sup> Descartes rejects this position in that same letter to Mersenne, 6 May 1630:

As for eternal truths, I say that *they are true or possible only because God knows them as true or possible, and they are not known as true by God in any way that would imply that they are true independently of Him.* And if men understood the meanings of their words properly, they could never say without blasphemy that the truth of something is prior to the knowledge that God has of it.<sup>35</sup>

In the subsequent letter, God is described as the "efficient and total cause" of the eternal truths, "the author of the essence of created things no less than of their existence; and this essence is nothing other than the eternal truths." [To Mersenne, 27 May 1630, CSMK 25; AT i, 152] Here again let us note the break with the past. The recognized view was the familiar Neo-Platonic one of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: essences as forms were properly thought of as participations of the divine essence. It follows therefore that creation was the free divine act of bringing [some of] these eternal essences into existence (as in the case of angels), of embodying some others, thus bringing many individual things having the same essence or form into existence; God is the creator of existences, but not of these eternal essences. Essences might be thought of as possible beings, beings that could possibly exist, and creation the actualizing of such possible beings. Here Descartes is saying that God is the free creator of the possibilities

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<sup>32</sup> St. Augustine moves to a knowledge of God's existence through the eternal truths of mathematics, for him higher than the changing human subject, to the unchangeable God. *De lib. arb.* II, iii7-xv39; *De vera relig.* xxix, 52-58.

<sup>33</sup> See J-L. Marion, *La théologie blanche*, Paris, 1981, 140-159, for a full account of the 'exemplarism' of Bérulle in its relation to Descartes.

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Stephen Gaukroger, *Descartes, an Intellectual Biography*, Oxford, 1995, 205.

<sup>35</sup> AT i, 149. The italicized words, as noted in Jean-Luc Marion, *La théologie blanche*, 27-8, are in Latin in a letter otherwise in French, and stick closely to the syntax and terminology of the Suarez text quoted above, clearly and deliberately reversing the thought expressed in Suarez. It is said that Suarez adds elsewhere, even more radically, that even if God did not exist, the eternal truths would still be true.



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themselves, the free creator of essences. God is prior to and determines what is possible. Descartes draws the Augustinian term 'eternal truths' and the Scholastic term 'essence' into an identity - the eternal truth that 'lines drawn from the center to the circumference are equal' is the essence of the circle.<sup>36</sup>

God was as free "to make it not true that all the radii of the circle are equal - just as he was free not to create the world," [To Mersenne, 27 May 1630, CSMK 25; AT i, 152] -- a significant statement in two respects. First of all, the truths of mathematics are drawn into relation to the created world. Amos Funkenstein explains this mutual relation:

Mathematical relations (and geometry, for Descartes, is throughout quantifiable) constitute all that is known and all that can be known about matter...In the light of the interchangeability of geometry and matter, Descartes's belief that God could have abstained ... from creating mathematics may be given a minimal and most conservative interpretation: God could have abstained from creating *matter*. This interpretation rests on the assumption that the eternal truths (e.g.mathematics) do not exist Platonically in and of themselves, but are always truths in reference to existent things ...<sup>37</sup>

There is also the interesting and careful way in which Descartes puts the matter. He did not say that God could have made a circle with unequal radii. Nor does he do so in later discussions of the Divine freedom. Although Descartes will grant that God could ordain things we do not understand [Rep.II Obj., AT vii, 436-7], still he never suggests that God could have brought it about that twice four was, say, nine, or that the three angles of a triangle were equal to, say, three right angles. He says rather, "God could have brought it about that it was not true that twice four makes eight" [Rep. II Obj., CSM II, 294; AT vii, 436] and God could have "made it false that the three angles of a triangle were equal to two right angles." [To Mesland, 2 May 1644, CSMK 235; AT iv, 118-9] This careful manner of stating these possibilities is too little noted by commentators,<sup>38</sup> and as a result they attribute to Descartes a radical voluntarism bordering on incoherence.

What is the significance of this theological position on the creation of eternal truths? It is universally agreed that the doctrine is original to Descartes.<sup>39</sup> Étienne Gilson says it is

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<sup>36</sup> Cf. Bréhier, p.194.

<sup>37</sup> *Theology and the Scientific Imagination*, Princeton, 1986, p.184.

<sup>38</sup> Hide Ishiguro in "The Status of Necessity and Impossibility in Descartes", in Rorty, *op.cit.*, 459-471, addresses fully the significance of the difference. She provides an account of even the most radical statements of Descartes concerning God's freedom, e.g. that God was free to have made it not true that contradictions are incompatible, and finds Descartes' position consistent. But others do not make the distinction. Gaukroger, *Intellectual Biography*, for example, says, "God could have created a world in which the radii of a circle were unequal but which was identical to the present one in every other respect." (p. 205) ; Daniel Garber, *Descartes' Metaphysical Physics*, Chicago, 1992, 154, makes the error Ishiguro condemns, and Funkenstein notes the difference but considers the matter in Descartes ambiguous.

<sup>39</sup> See the evidence in Marion, *La théologie blanche*, 11-12.

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"perhaps the most original"<sup>40</sup>; Alquié recognizes in it "the key to Cartesian metaphysics"<sup>41</sup>, but as Marion observes, "...to recognize it as a key is not enough: a key opens, but the opening accomplished, it loses all essential interest...the opening [overture] in philosophy as in music must cease for the act to begin."<sup>42</sup> It is the "key" surely in this sense, that it reveals the problematic which the later metaphysics must address. Descartes abandoned the *Regulae*<sup>43</sup> with its naive confidence in the mathematical method he described there, for reasons we have already explored. We might ask how it came to pass that he began to reflect on these divine matters? Modest suggestions are offered -- was it, in composing *Le Monde*, that he wanted to avoid theological difficulties by counterbalancing his theory of the impossibility of a vacuum with a strong theological assertion of Divine omnipotence?<sup>44</sup> Was it a desire to situate his sense of the necessity of mathematical truth into a suitable theological framework?<sup>45</sup> Was it, as Gaukroger suggests, to bolster the idea of an utterly transcendent God, the "right sort of God" suited to a mechanistic science of nature?<sup>46</sup>

There is no need to look further for the reason Descartes turns to a consideration of these matters in 1630. The logic of the situation is clear enough: the impasse he had reached in his mathematical and methodological studies is enveloped, comprehended and overcome in the doctrine of the "creation of eternal truths", in his religious or theological consciousness. God who freely creates all things -- the universe and mathematics which embodies its truth, has also freely created finite minds to understand those very truths. All the elements of a foundation for a Cartesian science of nature are there, but in the form of theological doctrine and faith. How shall they achieve philosophical form? The doctrine of the "creation of eternal truths" is a true revelation for him who had been forced to abandon the naive confidence of the *Regulae*. That same doctrine is the problematic which he must address philosophically in the *Meditations*.

### 3. A Philosophical Foundation For Human Understanding

There is in the Cartesian philosophy a set of interrelated theses and suppositions revolving around the fundamental principle "Whatever is clear and distinct is true". Any

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<sup>40</sup> *La liberté chez Descartes et la théologie*, Paris, 1913, 157

<sup>41</sup> Alquié, 90.

<sup>42</sup> Marion. *La théologie blanche*, 13.

<sup>43</sup> Jean-Luc Marion argues that the *Regulae* is not abandoned. Rather, it has a nascent metaphysics in its account of simple natures, an account which is brought to fruition in the *Meditations*. See his "Cartesian Metaphysics and the role of the Simple Natures" in John Cottingham ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Descartes*, Cambridge, 1992, 115-139. Together with his account of the *Meditations* as essentially related to the objections raised against the *Discours* and to the *Objections* and *Replies*, there emerges a view of the Cartesian corpus as one of continuous reference forward and backward.

<sup>44</sup> Garber's hypothesis, 149-154, somewhat undermined by his 'voluntarist' interpretation of Descartes' doctrine. See n. 53.

<sup>45</sup> Osler suggests this, p. 126, but does not offer any explanation of what this might mean.

<sup>46</sup> *Intellectual Biography*, 196-99.

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one of these theses therefore involves the others and cannot really be clarified without reference to them. Hyperbolic doubt pushed to the limit with the 'demon' hypothesis, the relation of that hypothesis to God's omnipotence and His creation of eternal truths, the proof of God's existence as guarantee of those same eternal truths and the problems of circularity surrounding that proof, are so entwined that a proper treatment of one clarifies much about the others.

Here I shall weave these theses around the hypothesis of the Evil Demon, the *genius malignus*, the supposition Descartes employs to push doubt to its extreme point, "substituting", as Gilson said, "for a simple critique of our knowledge a critique of our means of knowing."<sup>47</sup> The *genius malignus* makes its appearance as the last stage and culmination of doubt in Meditation I, after Descartes has employed well-used skeptical devices such as the illusions of the senses, the possibility of madness, of dreaming. He claims a certain originality for the hypothesis of a deceiving demon, and it is only in the *Meditations* that he employs the device.<sup>48</sup>

Descartes' employment of the supposition of an evil demon manipulating our minds on the one side, or changing the truth itself on the other, so that what was true yesterday might no longer be true today, is the work of no ordinary demon. In that hypothesis, which has a certain appeal to the imagination, Descartes initiates a critique of the understanding itself. It is immediately aimed at "eternal truths", that is, mathematical truths which for Descartes are properly truths of the understanding. It is an easy step from the doctrine of the "creation of eternal truths" to a requirement for a Divine guarantee of them. It is even easier to understand why the Evil Demon hypothesis can highlight their dubitability without that guarantee. We shall turn our attention to the Divine guarantee first, together with the proof for God's existence in Meditation Three, and then to the scope of the deception emanating from the Evil Demon after that, for the latter will take us to the full discussion of the relation of the Evil Demon to the Divine omnipotence.

### (a) *The Requirement of a Divine Guarantee*

For mathematical truths to be redeemed after the hypothesis of the Evil Demon has rendered them dubitable, it is required that we prove the truth of the principle of the understanding, "What is clear and distinct is true." For this to be established we must have a valid proof that God exists and is no deceiver. But from the beginning, commentators were concerned that Descartes' proof was not valid, that he was guilty of circular reasoning. The matter is addressed twice in the *Objections and Replies* which were published with the *Meditations* and also in the *Conversation with Burman*. Descartes' responses have proven challenging to contemporary analysis.

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<sup>47</sup> *Discours de la Methode, Texte et Commentaire*, Paris, 1925, 290.

<sup>48</sup> In Descartes' *Conversation with Burman* he says, "This is why he raises not only the customary difficulties of the Sceptics but every difficulty that can possibly be raised; the aim is in this way to demolish completely every single doubt. And this is the purpose behind the introduction at this point of the demon, which some might criticize as a superfluous addition." CB, 4.

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Arnauld's difficulty in Fourth Objections is directed at the proof in the Third Meditation:

I have one further worry, namely how the author avoids reasoning in a circle when he says that we can be sure that what we clearly and distinctly perceive is true only because God exists. But we can be sure that God exists only because we clearly and distinctly perceive this. Hence, before we can be sure that God exists, we ought to be able to be sure that whatever we perceive clearly and evidently is true." [CSM II, 150; AT vii, 214]

In response to Arnauld, Descartes distinguishes what we perceive clearly [*clare percipimus*] and what we recall having clearly perceived before [*recordamur nos antea clare percipisse*]. He refers Arnauld to what he answered in the Second Set of Replies. The objectors had more or less the same problem as Arnauld, and to them he replied:

I expressly declared that I was speaking only of knowledge of those conclusions [quoting indirectly from Med. 5] which can be recalled when we are no longer attending to the arguments by means of which we deduced them [*quarum memoria potest recurrere, cum non amplius attendimus ad rationes ex quibus ipsas deduximus*]" [CSM II, 100; AT vii, 140]

These two responses have convinced some commentators [W. Doney, "The Cartesian Circle", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol.XVI (1955), 324-38; Bernard Williams in his article on Descartes in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 1967 (but not in his *Descartes, The Project of Pure Enquiry*, Pelican, 1978) that God is used as the guarantor of the memory. As Cottingham explains, "According to this view, when I clearly and distinctly perceive P, I can know the truth of P even if I do not yet know that there is a God; after I have proved God's existence, however, I can know the truth of P even if I merely 'remember' that I once clearly and distinctly perceived it."<sup>49</sup> This would be an odd claim if taken literally, since memory is notoriously fallible.

But there is another way to interpret Descartes' explanation, one which gathers the former into itself as we shall see. This interpretation is more easily available in the responses of Descartes to Burman. Burman says there seems to be a circle in the third Meditation, because the author proves that God exists through axioms, even though he is not yet certain about not being deceived about these [*probat auctor Deum esse per axiomata, cum sibi necdum constet se in iis non falli*]. To this Descartes answers that he

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<sup>49</sup> CB, xxvii. Cottingham's explanation is confirmed in a letter to Hyperaspistes, August 1641, where Descartes says: "Certainly I have never denied that the sceptics themselves, as long as they clearly perceive some truth, spontaneously assent to it. It is only in name, and perhaps in intention and resolve, that they adhere to their heresy of doubting everything. But I was dealing only with things which we remember having clearly perceived earlier, not with those which we clearly perceive at the present moment, as can be seen on pages 84 and 344 [AT,vii, 69, 245]." AT iii, 434.

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proves and knows he is not deceived in them because he is attending to them [*quoniam ad ea attendit*]; as long as he does it, he is certain that he is not deceived, and is compelled to assent to them [*quamdiu autem id facit, certus est se no falli, et cogitur illis assentiri*]. Cottingham draws attention to the express reference here to the mind focussing on and attending to a proposition, and in that light he interprets Descartes' references to memory. Since we cannot attend to an unlimited number of propositions at one time (we can attend to more than one proposition, Descartes says in CB, AT v, 148), there would be no possibility of systematic knowledge without some guarantee that our discursiveness is not an ultimate ground for doubt about such systematic knowledge.

In other passages too it is clear that the issue is whether what we knew clearly *when we attended to it* can be said to be true when we're no longer attending directly to it. Common principles and axioms, for example "It is impossible that one and the same thing should both be and not be" cannot be denied by anyone who carefully focuses his attention on them (...*quoniam ea ab eo, qui attente ad illa animadvertit, negari non possunt.*) And perhaps the clearest passage is later in CB: "If we were ignorant that all truth has its origin in God, then however clear our ideas were [*quamvis tam clarae essent ideae nostrae*], we would not know them to be true or that we were not mistaken, that is to say when we were not paying attention to them and [only] recalled having perceived them clearly and distinctly. [*scilicet cum ad eas non adverteremus, et quando solum recordaremur nos illas clare et distincte percepisse.*] [CB, 49-50, AT v, 178.]

It is also asserted that before we know God exists we can be certain of common notions, of the *cogito*, even of the truths of mathematics *while we are thinking of these matters*, but we cannot know they are true without knowledge of God. If we turn our attention away from them even in the self-conscious reflection on what we are contemplating, we can doubt them, through an Evil Demon perhaps, so long as we do not know God exists. In this account, certainty is of simple apprehension: immediate, passive, available to an attentive mind. Truth is in judgment, an act of will, is therefore mediated and only properly available to us after we know God exists. This view is supported by the texts too. Consider, for example, the several places where Descartes denies true knowledge to the atheist, especially revealing in this passage:

The fact that an atheist can be said to 'know clearly that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles', I do not deny; but I affirm that this cognition is not true science because no cognition that could be rendered doubtful seems fit to be called science; since we are supposing him to be an atheist, he cannot be certain that he is not deceived even in those things which are most evident to him, as has been shown sufficiently; and even if this doubt does not occur to him, it can nevertheless occur, if he examines [the matter] or if someone else proposes it; neither will he ever be free of doubt unless he first acknowledge God. [Rep. II Obj., CSM II, 101; AT vii, 141]

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The moment of certainty, as prior to the knowledge of truth, is nowhere more dramatically stated than in Meditation Three. There Descartes looks from one side to the other, from the simple considerations of mathematics to the possibility of a deceptive god, then back again.

But what about when I was considering something very simple and straightforward in arithmetic and geometry, for example that two and three added together make five, and so on? Did I not see at least these things clearly enough to affirm their truth? Indeed the only reason for my later judgment that they were open to doubt was that it occurred to me that perhaps some God could have given me a nature such that I was deceived even by matters which seemed most evident. And whenever this presentiment of the highest power of God occurs to me, I cannot but admit that it would be easy for him, if he so desired, to bring it about that I err even in those things which seem to me I see most evidently with the mind's eye. Yet when I turn to the things themselves which I think I perceive very clearly, I am so convinced by them that I spontaneously declare: let whoever is able to deceive me, he can never cause me to be nothing while I shall think myself something; or make it true that I have never been since I now in truth exist; or even more strongly that two and three are more or less than five, or similar things in which I see a manifest contradiction. [Med.III, CSM II, 25; AT vii, 36]

Can he be deceived in all these things which seem to him most manifest? So long as he does not know whether God exists, and whether he can be a deceiver, then Descartes can be deceived: "For if I do not know this, it seems that I can never be quite certain about anything else."

The texts support two positions on the subject of what precisely it is that is wanting prior to the proof for God's existence: on the one hand, without that proof, there is only the certainty of the moment and no possibility of a systematic knowledge, no possibility then of science; on the other hand, without that proof, there is no knowledge properly speaking. So it would seem justifiable to say that the movement from the *cogito* to the proof for God's existence is a movement from *certainty* to *truth*.

### *(b) The Proof of God's Existence in Meditation Three*

If Descartes would know that anything exists other than his own *ego*, in particular if he would know that God exists, he can only appeal to his knowledge of himself, that is, of his own mind and its contents. The argument he constructs in the Third Meditation does not violate this restriction. Moreover, proceeding in this manner reveals a new kind of knowledge of God quite beyond the methods of medieval speculation. To move to a knowledge of God through the sensible world is only possible by a *via negativa*: God is not what His creatures are, not finite, not mutable, not corruptible. Knowing only what

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God is not is the price that must be paid if our knowledge must ascend to God from our experience of the sensible world.

The elements of Descartes' first argument that God necessarily exists as cause of the idea of God in Descartes' mind are: (1) that he has (and we have if we attend to it) an idea of God, "an infinite substance, eternal, immutable, independent, most intelligent, most powerful, and from whom I myself and whatever else, if anything else exists, is created." [CSM II, 31; AT vii, 45] (2) and that he has this idea requires a cause possessing as much perfection and reality as the object of the idea, that is, that the cause of the idea must be no less than "infinite substance, eternal, immutable, independent, most intelligent, etc." Both elements have been criticized more or less severely ever since the *Meditations* appeared. Hobbes in the third set of *Objections* denies that there is an idea of God in us [AT vii, 180], Gassendi in the fifth set asks how Descartes could know that God is represented by the idea he has as "supreme, eternal, infinite, omnipotent and the creator of all things" -- indeed, God is infinitely beyond anything we can grasp, and when we try to contemplate him, "it is not only in darkness, but is reducible to nothing." [CSM II, 199-201; AT vii, 287-8]

The contemporary challenge concerning Descartes' idea of God is provided by Jean-Luc Marion. From the backdrop of the medieval discussion of "divine names"<sup>50</sup> Marion finds in the Cartesian idea a concatenation of incompatible attributes: God spoken of as "infinite substance" amounts to an assertion of the "radically unknowable" transcendence of the divine essence<sup>51</sup>, and asserts an "incommensurable gap" between God and creatures; the *a priori* proof of Descartes characterizes God as *summe perfectum* carrying to perfection "every quality finite beings possess imperfectly and therefore on a continuum with them." In the former denomination, God "escapes all finite representations" and, Marion concludes, "the old *via negativa* of theology repeats itself..."; but the latter manner of conceiving God's essence, insofar as it denies the incommensurable gap between God and creatures, is in opposition to the former.

But this reading of the *a posteriori* proof is anachronistic and entirely opposed by Descartes. The idea of God for which Descartes seeks the cause in Meditation Three is a positive idea as Descartes clearly states.<sup>52</sup> There is no return to the *via negativa* of medieval theology -- no derivation of the idea of God from finite things, and no

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<sup>50</sup> "...from Descartes on, metaphysical discussions of the characteristics and attributes of God consist in transposing and translating, so to speak, into purely philosophical terms theological debates on the divine names as they arise until [*sic.*] the Scriptures, through the intermediation of the formulations given to them by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (fifth century?) in his celebrated *De divinis nominibus*."

<sup>51</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, "The Idea of God" in *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth Century Philosophy*, Cambridge, 1997, Vol. 1, 276.

<sup>52</sup> "And I must not think that...my perception of the infinite is arrived at not by means of a true idea but merely by negating the finite. On the contrary, I clearly understand that there is more reality in an infinite substance than in a finite one, and hence that my perception of the infinite, that is God, is in some way prior to my perception of the finite, that is myself." CSM II, 32; AT vii, 45. Marion cannot connect the finite and the infinite in any other way than by "analogy", the *via negativa* which he attributes to Descartes. Descartes himself finds that knowledge of the finite has its foundation directly in the infinite.

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movement, therefore, to God from the finite world, a route obviously barred when once the whole sensible world has collapsed under the doubt. In the idea of God which he finds within himself, Descartes regards the attribute "infinite" in the same positive sense in which he later takes the attribute "most perfect".<sup>53</sup> It is fundamental to modern philosophy that it proceed from thought alone, and not from an externality prior to thought. Descartes identifies the idea of God in us as "innate", a poorly chosen word perhaps, but required to distinguish it from medieval derivations. "Now any elements in our thought which do not resemble external objects manifestly cannot have originated in external objects, but must have come from the cause which produced this diversity in our thought." [Rep. III Obj., CSM 132; AT vii, 188] Just as the Protestant reformer knows the moral law as "written in his heart" and not given externally, so Descartes knows this idea of God to be his "innately".

But is the idea of God which Descartes describes in various ways, sometimes leaving out one or more attributes which he includes elsewhere, non-contradictory? It remains for subsequent seventeenth century philosophy to take up this issue directly, Leibniz in particular, who observes that "we cannot safely infer from definitions until we know that they are real or that they involve no contradiction."<sup>54</sup> But Descartes himself recognized the need for some way of knowing the idea to be consistent: he reflects on the question "could this idea of God be materially false and thus come from nothing?" To this he answers "whatever I clearly and distinctly perceive as being real and true, and implying any perfection, is wholly contained in it." [Med. III, CSM II, 32; AT vii, 46]<sup>55</sup> It might have taken centuries for men to come to know this idea which is theirs simply in their rationality, but it is no mere figment: "It is very striking that metaphysicians unanimously agree in their descriptions of the attributes of God (at least in the case of those which can be known solely by human reason)."<sup>56</sup>

The second element in the proof of Meditation Three which raises objections is the requirement for the cause of the idea in us. There is initial discontent with the sudden appearance of the causal principle itself, "Now it is manifest by the natural light that there must be as much reality in the efficient and total cause as in the effect of that cause." [Med. III, CSM II, 28; AT vii, 40] The principle appears gratuitous and therefore

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<sup>53</sup> This is obvious further in Meditation Three, where he identifies the two attributes as primary in his idea of God: "This idea of a supremely perfect and infinite being is, I say, true in the highest degree..." CSM II, 31; AT vii, 46.

<sup>54</sup> "Meditations on Knowledge, Truth and Ideas", in Leroy Loemker ed., *Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz: Philosophical Papers and Letters*, Dordrecht-Holland, 1969, 293.

<sup>55</sup> Compare this to Leibniz's demonstration that the idea of *ens perfectissimum* is not contradictory, having in it only qualities which admit of a greatest degree, and all such qualities are compatible since they are all simple forms absolutely considered. To Elizabeth, Gerhardt, *Philosophischen Schriften von Leibniz IV*, 296.

<sup>56</sup> Rep. II Obj., CSM II, 99; AT vii, 138. He continues, "No one can possibly go wrong when he tries to form a correct conception of the idea of God, provided he is willing to attend to the nature of a supremely perfect being."



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suspect.<sup>57</sup> But such principles as "Nothing comes from nothing", or the principle of contradiction, commonly called (at least in Descartes' day) "first principles" are principles of thinking itself,<sup>58</sup> known as Descartes puts it by "natural light": they are as indubitable as thinking because they are simply what constitutes our thinking. As Descartes says, "Now some of these perceptions are so transparently clear and at the same time so simple that we cannot ever think of them without believing them to be true. The fact that I exist so long as I am thinking, or what is done cannot be undone, are examples of truths in respect of which we manifestly possess this kind of certainty. For we cannot doubt them unless we think them. But we cannot think them without believing at the same time that they are true, as was supposed. Hence we cannot doubt them without at the same time believing they are true; that is, we can never doubt them."<sup>59</sup> Thinking, after all, is a rational activity and is conducted through rational principles of thought.

This principle "There is nothing in the effect which was not previously present in the cause" is the same, Descartes says, as the common notion "Nothing comes from nothing". From that principle we may easily grant that "All the reality or perfection which is present in an idea merely objectively must be present in its cause either formally or eminently", for as Descartes reminds us, "This is the sole basis for all beliefs we have ever had about the existence of things located outside our mind" -- what else could explain why we suspect that sensible things exist except that we refer our ideas of them to a cause. It is patently obvious that we make use of the principle in ordinary experience, but refuse, inconsistently, to extend the use of the principle to non-empirical ideas.<sup>60</sup>

There remains the last objection that we shall consider: why does an idea require a cause which possesses either formally or eminently what is objectively the content of that idea? It is a matter Descartes took up in detail in his reply to Caterus, for Caterus had argued that a thing existing in the mind by means of an idea is not the same as an actual thing, that is, a being located outside the mind. But "since it is merely conceived and is not actual" there is no causality at work here. Descartes agrees that it does not require a cause enabling it to exist outside the mind, "but" he adds, "it surely needs a cause enabling it to be conceived, which is the sole point at issue." [Rep. I Obj. CSM II, 75; AT vii, 103] Then Descartes gives the apt example of the idea of a machine "of a highly intricate design". It would surely be a fair question to ask where the idea came from -- whether

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<sup>57</sup> Louis Loeb, 244, remarks, "Unfortunately, it is difficult to see what there is to recommend this principle other than its suitability for Descartes' argumentative purposes. One wonders how a figure of Descartes' intelligence, who has undertaken 'to withhold... assent from matters which are not entirely certain and indubitable'... and who includes beliefs about mathematics within the scope of doubt, could nevertheless unhesitatingly embrace the principle about causation as a deliverance of the light of nature."

<sup>58</sup> Spinoza states that all of the Cartesian philosophy comes from the principle "Nothing comes from nothing" -- even the *cogito* itself, for if something could come from nothing then thinking could come from non-being.

<sup>59</sup> Rep. II Obj., CSM II, 104; AT vii, 145-6. These principles are distinguished from mathematical propositions, truths which are perceived very clearly in our minds as long as we attend to the arguments on which our knowledge of them is derived. Thus these kinds can fall under the hyperbolic doubt.

<sup>60</sup> Marion questions this extension: "This implies a perhaps enlargement of the domain of causality, in so far as God is represented as the cause of His own idea in the *ego*." "Idea of God", 276.

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there was a real machine of this design which had been seen previously, whether the possessor of the idea, having extensive knowledge of mechanics or a particularly acute mind, might have himself invented the idea. It is a fair question to ask whose "intellectual property" the idea is. We would not be satisfied unless "all the intricacy which is to be found merely objectively in the idea" was found "either formally or eminently in its cause." [Rep. I Obj, CSM II, 75; AT vii, 104] These questions, this requirement, of the cause of the idea are easily granted in ordinary applications, but are, inconsistently, rejected when applied to the idea of God.

We must let the matter rest here, noting finally Descartes' resignation regarding the matter:

Those who give the matter their careful attention and spend time meditating with me will clearly see that there is within us an idea of a supremely powerful and perfect being, and also that the objective reality of this idea cannot be found in us, either formally or eminently. I cannot force this truth on my readers if they are lazy, since it depends solely on their exercising their own powers of thought. [Rep. II Obj., CSM II, 97; AT vii, 135-6]

### (c) *The Scope of Deception emanating from the Evil Demon*

It is argued by some that, contrary to what appears to be the case, the fictional Evil Demon is really quite effete and is not even powerful enough to cause us to doubt the truths of mathematics. And here we see a kind of literalism which might or might not add anything to the understanding of the Evil Demon hypothesis. Richard Kennington gives some interesting textual analysis to support his views that mathematics never succumbs to Cartesian doubt and that texts of the *Meditations* "by no means establish that the Evil Demon is omnipotent".

To support his first claim, that mathematics never succumbs to Cartesian doubt, Kennington notes the following: (1) God "who can do everything" is mentioned as a reason for doubting arithmetic and geometry in Meditation I; then God is withdrawn from the argument as a reason for doubt and replaced by the Evil Demon; (2) No form of mathematics is mentioned after the introduction of the Evil Demon hypothesis in Meditation I and in the recital of those matters which have succumbed to doubt prior to the *cogito* argument in Meditation II. In both places the specific list of dubitables all pertain to bodily things, including Descartes' own body; (3) Only God is offered as a possible reason for doubt about mathematics in *Principles of Philosophy*, I, 5-7: once atheism is considered (there is no Evil Demon mentioned in the *Principles*) the brief list of dubitables does not include mathematics, for again they are restricted to the external in general, to body in particular. This is confirmed in Reply IV Objections, where hyperbolic doubt, which includes doubt about mathematics, is based on "the author of my origin."

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What is problematic about the Evil Demon are the ways in which Descartes variously characterizes its power. He, as fully in possession of his philosophy, is perfectly aware that to speak of the Evil Demon as omnipotent and malignant is contradictory. Commenting to Burman on his supposition of the *genius malignus* in Meditation I, which he characterized there as 'of utmost power and cunning' [*eundemque summe potentem & callidum*], he notes that what he said in Meditation I is contradictory, since malice is incompatible with supreme power.<sup>61</sup> And later in the same discussion he comments on the same contradiction appearing in Meditation II, where even in the meditation itself he expresses a reservation about conjoining 'highest power' with wickedness.<sup>62</sup> In the *Meditations*, Descartes characterizes only God as a being *qui potest omnia*, or as *omnipotens*. The Evil Demon is described as *summe potens* (on the two occasions noted above) and once as *potentissimus*, which can mean either a very high degree of power, or "highest power".<sup>63</sup> We may conclude that Descartes was at pains to suppose in the Evil Demon sufficient power to deceive us in fundamental ways, but not ultimate power which would render the whole fiction a contradiction.

Could such a deceiver, of great but limited power then, deceive us regarding mathematics? But more important for the matter at hand (the scope of the doubt) is mathematics subject to hyperbolic doubt? Kennington says, "No", and offers as his argument the relative impotence of the Evil Demon. But whether the Evil Demon, or "some God", or "a deceiving God", or "some other being whatever name we call it", it is nonetheless undeniable that mathematical truths, eternal truths in general, fall under the hyperbolic doubt of the first meditation, and such truths are not recovered until the structure of the understanding is established in Meditation IV, and its principle, "Whatever is clear and distinct is true", laid down now indubitably in Meditation V. The reason for ambiguity about the scope of the power of the Evil Demon is this: if the concept of the Evil Demon is to be regarded as non-contradictory, his power must have limits. Then there might be some doubt as to his capacity to deceive us, regarding eternal truths specifically. But there could be no question of the power of God to deceive us if He so willed it. Or could there be?

And that brings us to a discussion of the Divine omnipotence, whether anything is impossible to the omnipotent God, whether in short God could, if he so willed, be an Evil Demon himself.

### *(d). The Evil Demon and Divine Omnipotence*

This problem has been considered in detail by Martial Gueroult in his masterpiece, *Descartes selon l'ordre des raisons*. He states the problem this way:

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<sup>61</sup> "...quia cum summa potentia malignitas consistere non potest." AT, v, 147.

<sup>62</sup> "...suppono deceptorem aliquem potentissimum, & si fas est dicere, malignum..." AT, vii, 26.

<sup>63</sup> These characterizations are given in Richard Kennington, "Descartes' Evil Genius", in Willis Doney, ed., *Eternal Truths and the Cartesian Circle: a Collection of Studies*, New York, 1987, 442.

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The hypothesis of the great deceiver, or the fiction of the evil genius, which constitutes the instrument of metaphysical doubt, poses a problem - that of its origin or of its foundation. Is it based, at least in part, on the nature of things, having its roots in some truths of Cartesian philosophy? Or is it, on the contrary, an artifice entirely alien to these truths, such that once these truths are discovered they radically abolish the pretext in whose name it was invoked?<sup>64</sup>

Some scholars, Gueroult names Gouhier and Bréhier, are persuaded that the Evil Demon is grounded in the nature of Divine omnipotence abstractly considered. Descartes says that God does not make the world to exist because he saw that as good; rather it is good solely because he made it. And  $2+3=5$  is true solely because God made it true. They reason further that God was as free to deceive us as he was free to create truths other than those we recognize as true. What saves us from universal deception, on this account, is God freely choosing to limit his omnipotence through his goodness. This is a decidedly nominalist reading of Descartes, where God's *potentia absoluta* can do anything at all, but what he does, through his *potentia ordinata*, is good and true simply in the doing. Peter Geach reads Descartes as possessed of this doctrine of absolute omnipotence, and shows the doctrine to be incoherent.<sup>65</sup> Stephen Gaukroger also expresses this radical interpretation of Descartes on divine omnipotence:

In his correspondence with Mersenne on the question of eternal truths, we saw that Descartes maintains that God's transcendence is such that he is not bound by empirical or even mathematical truths. He has created truths and could have created them differently, in a way that completely surpasses our understanding. Or, to put the matter in epistemological terms, He could have made all our beliefs false ... The epistemological correlate of the complete transcendence of God's powers takes the form of the introduction of hyperbolic doubt.<sup>66</sup>

But this is to look upon Divine omnipotence as arbitrary and capricious, or as Gueroult puts it, "God's power would thus conceal in its foundation something irrational and anarchical."<sup>67</sup>

What other interpretation is available to us which is both faithful to the texts and theologically sound? The Divine omnipotence must be shown to ground the doctrine of the creation of eternal truths while suppressing the Evil Demon hypothesis, that is, omnipotence properly understood would itself defeat deception. And so the texts will testify: "...and although the ability to deceive appears to be an indication of cleverness or power, the will to deceive is a mark not only of malice, but of weakness [*imbecilitas*]."[Med. IV, AT vii, 53] Omnipotence is radically opposed obviously to

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<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol I, 21.

<sup>65</sup> "Omnipotence", *Philosophy*, Vol. 48 (1973), 7-20.

<sup>66</sup> *Intellectual Biography*, 316-7.

<sup>67</sup> Gueroult, I, 22.

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*imbecilitas*, and itself also excludes malice: "...malice is incompatible with supreme power." [CB, 4] It is Descartes' constant and established position that deception is wholly excluded from the Divine Being: "The assertion that it is self-contradictory that men should be deceived by God is clearly demonstrated," he says, "from the fact that the form of deception is non-being, toward which the Supreme Being cannot tend." [Rep. VI Obj., AT vii, 428]

Then the God who could, if he would, "make it not true that all the radii of the circle are equal" [To Mersenne, AT i, 152], who could have "made it false that the three angles of a triangle were equal to two right angles" [To Mesland, 2 May 1644, AT iv, 118], who "could [perhaps] have commanded a creature to hate him, and thereby made this a good thing to do" [CB, AT v, 160], who "could have made it false that contradictories cannot be true together" [To Mesland, AT iv, 118], this same God cannot deceive us, and it is his omnipotence which suppresses deception. Clearly a deeper understanding of the Divine omnipotence is demanded if these matters are to be drawn together coherently.

There is already identified something that the omnipotent God cannot do: he cannot be the source in us of deception, for the reason that the Supreme Being "cannot tend to non-being". This which God cannot do can be generalized: whatever would limit the Divine omnipotence, or stands opposed to it, is absolutely impossible. Thus, "it is repugnant that God should deprive himself of his own existence, or that he should lose it externally." [AT v, 546]. Again, it is impossible to make beings independent of himself: "It is not the case that God would be showing the immensity of his power if he made things which could exist without him later on; on the contrary, he would thus be showing that his power was finite, since things once created would no longer depend on him." [To Hyperaspistes, August 1641, AT iii, 429]. Because of God's immutability, it is absolutely impossible for God to undo what has been [To More, 5 Feb 1649, AT v, 273], or to undermine causal relations: "Whatever is in God is not in reality separate from God himself; rather it is identical with God himself. Concerning the decrees of God which have already been enacted, it is clear that God is unalterable with regard to these..." [CB, AT v, 348].

There are, as Gueroult identifies, two orders of impossibility and two orders of truth in Descartes' system.<sup>68</sup> We have discovered a realm of *absolute impossibility* founded on the uncreated truth of the omnipotent Divine Being. Then there is the region of impossibility referring to our understanding, the realm of created "eternal truths". In our world, "there cannot be a mountain without a valley" [Med. 5; also to Arnauld, 26 June 1648, AT v, 223], the sum of the angles of the triangle are equal to two right angles, and in general "contradictories cannot be true together". But these are not *absolute impossibilities*, or at least are not known *quoad nos* as absolutely impossible.

I do not even dare say that God could not make it the case that a mountain be without a valley or that one and two not make three. I say only that God

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<sup>68</sup> Gueroult, Vol.II, 20-28.

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gave me a mind such that I cannot conceive a mountain without a valley or a sum of one and two which should not be three. [To Arnauld, 29 July 1648, AT v, 224]

There is a letter to Henry More in which Descartes muses about these two orders of impossibility. More could not accept that God could not create a vacuum, and his difficulty prompts this answer:

But you are quite ready to admit that in the natural course of events there is no vacuum: you are concerned about God's power, which you think can take away from the contents of a container while preventing its sides from meeting. For my part, I know that my intellect is finite and God's power is infinite, and so I set no limits to it; I consider only what I am capable of perceiving, and what not, and I take great pains that my judgement should accord with my perception. And so I boldly assert that God can do everything which I perceive to be possible, but I am not so bold as to assert the converse, namely that he cannot do what conflicts with my conception of things - I merely say that it involves a contradiction. And so, since I see that it conflicts with my way of conceiving things for all body to be taken out of a container and for there to remain an extension which I conceive in no way differently than I previously conceived the body contained in it, I say that it involves a contradiction that such an extension should remain there after the body has been taken away. I conclude that the sides of the container must come together...In the same way I say that it involves a contradiction that there should be any atoms which are conceived as extended and at the same time indivisible. Though god might make them such that they could not be divided by any creature, we certainly cannot understand that he might deprive himself of the power of dividing them. Your comparison with things which have been done and cannot be undone is not to the point. For we do not take it as a mark of impotence when someone cannot do something which we do not understand to be possible, but only when he cannot do something which we distinctly perceive to be possible Now we certainly perceive it to be possible for an atom to be divided, since we suppose it to be extended; and so, if we judge that it cannot be divided by God, we shall judge God cannot do one of the things which we perceive to be possible. But we do not in the same way perceive it to be possible for what is done to be undone - on the contrary, we perceive it to be altogether impossible, and so it is no defect of power in God not to do it.

Descartes here distinguishes what is *absolutely impossible* from what is impossible to our understanding. If he does not say it here explicitly, it is nonetheless true and everywhere implied that in the Cartesian philosophy, what is impossible *quoad nos* is drawn into relation with the realm of absolute impossibility, created "eternal truths" with uncreated

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truth. It is *absolutely impossible* that God could deceive. Therefore, what is clear and distinct is *true*.

But there is a wider, more comprehensive "circle" in the Cartesian philosophy, which expresses the ultimate limit of human understanding. By the "natural light" of the understanding, a faculty created by God, we come to know not only created eternal truths but uncreated truth: that God exists, that God is not a deceiver, that God is immutable, a necessary being, *causa sui*. But God is not subject to the limits of our understanding, and we only have access to these uncreated truths through a faculty given to us by Him. If our understanding seeks some unconditional verification of God's existence and truthfulness, through means outside the scope of God's creative will, it seeks in vain.<sup>69</sup> Human understanding cannot itself escape this "circle". But it finds in that embrace no grounds for doubt about its powers, every reason for exercising them in a science of nature, and every confidence that when it achieves clarity and distinctness, it finds truth. "What is it to us," Descartes exclaims, "that someone may make out that the perception whose truth we are so firmly convinced of may appear false to God or an angel, so that it is, absolutely speaking, false? Why should this alleged 'absolute falsity' bother us, since we neither believe in it nor have even the smallest suspicion of it? For the supposition which we are making here is of a conviction so firm that it is quite incapable of being destroyed; and such a conviction is clearly the same as the most perfect certainty." [Rep. II Obj., CSM II, 103; AT vii, 145.]

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<sup>69</sup> Cf. Hatfield, 276-7.