

Descartes, God and the Eternal Truths *Paul Sperring*

Descartes is thought to have held that the eternal truths,¹ such as the truths of mathematics or Euclidean geometry, no less than anything else, were freely created by an act of the divine will. Many have puzzled over quite how Descartes' claims on this issue are to be understood. However, on the face of things, if Descartes did take the eternal truths to be created by God, then it seems to cast doubt on their status as eternal.

In short, if God willed the truths to be then they might not have been (since God might not have willed them), and if that's the case then it seems that they can't really be eternally true. Or to put it another way: if God *freely* chose to make it the case that all triangles were 3-sided, he might easily have decided to have made it not the case that all triangles were 3-sided. That is, he might have made it the case that some were 4-sided, or maybe that all of them were 4-sided (which is not to say that he turned them all into squares, but that he made 4-sided *triangles*).

So, firstly we have:

- (1) If God freely created the eternal truths (that is to say, necessary truths), then they are possibly not the case (e.g. God might have chosen not to create them).

But then it seems we have:

- (2) If the eternal truths are possibly not the case then they are not necessary (so no eternal truths).

The Problem

So, accepting (1) and (2), we should say that there *couldn't* be eternal truths if there is a God who creates them freely.

Solutions

- (i) Bite the bullet and accept that there are no necessary truths (and explain away what we take to be necessary truths);
- (ii) Deny the antecedent² of (1) (i.e., that God creates the eternal truths);
- (iii) Show that the consequent of (1) is not entailed by its antecedent;
- (iv) Show that despite the fact that we can accept (1) it does not thereby entail (2).

On the face of it it appears that Descartes' only option is to go for something like (iv), since the denial that there are necessary truths prevents the a priori proofs of God's

existence from getting off the ground (since they depend on necessary truths) and his whole project goes up in smoke.³ Also, the denial that God was free to do whatever he wanted with respect to these truths seems to be flatly at odds with many of the claims that Descartes made on the matter, as we will see, so he had better not accept (ii) or (iii) at least for the sake of consistency.

Different authors have plumped for different 'solutions' in their attempts to understand Descartes' explicit statements, and implicit commitments, with respect to these matters. Frankfurt (1977) argues for a full-blown denial of the necessity interpretation – but thinks that there is plausibility in the view that such a position is ultimately incoherent.⁴ Curley (1984) offers something like (iv) in arguing that although the truths are possibly not necessary it does not follow that they are, therefore, not necessary – this depends on the 'iterated modality' claim, that while certain truths are necessarily true they are not necessarily necessarily true. McFetridge (1990) offers an interesting solution, which doesn't quite fit straightforwardly into the options I have set out above. He denies (in line with (iii)) that the necessary truths are possibly not the case in one sense of possible, and also that were they thought to be possible in another sense then it would not follow that they are not necessary (*à la* (iv)).

I do not intend here to discuss the relative merits and demerits of each individual solution to the problem (as I have set it out). I want, rather, to focus on one element discussed by many of the commentators, which appears to me to be the place where some of the confusion lies, and from where a satisfactory solution might spring were the confusion there avoided. The element in question is the relationship between God facts and other facts – that's to say, between necessary truths pertaining to the nature and existence of God and the necessary truths ordained by God.

God Facts

In a letter to Mersenne (6 May 1630) Descartes says:

One must not say, then, that *if God did not exist, nevertheless those truths would still be true*, for the existence of God is the first and most eternal of all the truths which can be, and the only one from which all the others proceed.

Why does Descartes make such a claim? Well if he thinks that nothing is independent of God's will then the eternal truths, and anything else for that matter, must arise somehow from God's freely chosen actions. Not that they depend on God simply as a matter of fact, whereby there could be some other source for them, but that of necessity nothing would be immutable or eternal unless there existed the immutable and eternal God who willed it to be so. Of course, all of this needs to be unpacked somewhat, since appeals are made here to things contingent and necessary.

What modal⁵ claims is it appropriate to make about God? Descartes says that God has necessary existence.⁶ Since everything else depends on God's free choices then everything else must, in some sense, be contingent.⁷ So if the truths of mathematics, geometry and logic are necessary then this must be in virtue of some contingent fact – i.e., that God made a decision to bring it about that such and such truths would be immutably and eternally true. This seems to support Curley's views of the necessary

truths as not necessarily true (i.e., that they are not necessarily necessary).⁸ But, to come back to the initial question – what about the modal status of God facts? Are they necessarily necessary?

For Descartes God facts, such as the fact that God exists, that God is immutable, that God's will and intellect are one, and so on, are necessary insofar as it is not possible that any of them failed to obtain. Now, it seems that the root of their necessity cannot be some contingent fact, such as: God decided freely to instantiate this or that feature of his essence. This must be so, since to deny it is to assert that it might not have been the case that God had this or that particular perfection – and that would be the undoing of the Ontological proof, among other undesirable consequences for Descartes.

So is part of what Descartes meant, in the quotation taken from the letter to Mersenne, that the 'most eternal of all the truths', truths about God,⁹ are of a higher order of necessity than those eternal truths ordained by God? This seems a plausible reading. If so, is it any clearer from this how the latter depend on the former? By no means. For that one would have to dig a little deeper.

Creating The Eternal Truths

Descartes has it that there can be no limits to God's creative powers¹⁰ – that is to say, nothing binds God to bring about this or that state of affairs, or make some or other proposition true.

So, in a letter to Arnauld (29 July 1648) Descartes says:

...I do not think that we should ever say of anything that it cannot be brought about by God. For since everything involved in truth and goodness depends on His omnipotence, I would not dare to say that God cannot make a mountain without a valley, or that one and two should not be three.¹¹

And this, from the *Sixth Replies*:

To one who pays attention to God's immensity, it is clear that nothing at all can exist which does not depend on Him. This is true not only of everything that subsists, but of all order, of every law, and of every reason of truth and goodness; for otherwise God...would have not been wholly indifferent to the creation of what He has created. For if any reason for what is good had preceded His preordination, it would have determined Him toward that which it was best to bring about; but on the contrary because He determined Himself towards those things which ought to be accomplished, for that reason...*they are very good*; that is to say, the reason for their goodness is the fact that He wished to create them so.

So from this it seems clear that God is free ('indifferent') with respect to all things other than himself. Nothing independent of God imposes itself on God of necessity. Now if the eternal truths were thought to be eternal insofar as they existed, in a manner of speaking, prior to God's decrees then God would not have been free to bring it about that such and such be the case (since that which already is needs no

creation), and it seems also that God would not have been free to bring it about that such and such were not the case (since eternally true). In order, therefore, for it to be the case that God is not bound by anything independent of himself it cannot be that anything is so independently of himself (eternal truths included).

...Descartes would *not* acknowledge any exceptions to the doctrine that God created the eternal truths because according to his more general doctrine of divine creation God has created literally everything. There are no substances, there are no essences, there are no truths possible or necessary about anything whatsoever that are independent of God, for God *created* them all.

(La Croix (1991) p. 38) La Croix suggests that this is so since Descartes is committed both to the doctrine of the independence of God and to the doctrine of God's simplicity. Subsequently Descartes cannot claim anything but that everything arises from the divine decrees.

So there is at least some obvious sense in which God creates the eternal truths – since he creates whatever is. However, it isn't yet completely clear from this how we are to understand the creative act, with respect to the eternal truths, and the seeming implication (from various of Descartes' writings, already quoted) that God could have arranged matters differently – perhaps making the law of contradiction not apply everywhere (or, indeed, anywhere).

There are different ways to understand the claim that God was free to do what he would with respect to the eternal truths. La Croix identifies three:

1. That God could have chosen to actualise different laws than those that he did.
2. That God could repeal the laws that he has decreed.
3. That God could bring about some state of affairs that is contrary to the laws that he had decreed.

The first is rejected on the grounds that we have already said that nothing could be prior to the divine decrees, so it cannot make sense to talk about there being different possibilities before God's mind that he can choose from unless one thinks that there are some things independent of God's mind that he comes to be aware of – and this Descartes rejected.

The second and third options depend on us understanding God's powers in such a way as to think that he can change those things that he has decreed. But this seems to be at odds with what Descartes actually thought – since God willed that the truths be eternal it cannot be the case that these things are changeable, even by some subsequent divine act. To understand this we perhaps have to qualify what is meant by 'God's power' in such a way that our understanding of God as free with respect to certain of his creative acts and un-free with respect to 'possible' others remains coherent.

If we distinguish between God's absolute power and God's ordained power then we can make sense of the claim that God cannot repeal the laws that he has decreed, while nonetheless remaining perfect. God is absolutely free 'prior to' his creative acts, nothing at all constrains him, his decisions depend on nothing other than his understanding and his will. However, in bringing about, for instance, the law of non-contradiction, and making such a law immutable and eternal, God becomes bound by such a law, and cannot change it – no matter what was true of God's absolute power. And we are by no means bound to say that God had to make such truths eternally true, but in making them so God had to leave them alone. This would appear to make sense of the following seemingly ambiguous claim made by Descartes in a letter to Mersenne (15 April 1630):

It will be said that if God had established these truths he could change them as a king changes his laws. To this the answer is: Yes he can, if his will can change. 'But I understand them to be eternal and unchangeable.' – I make the same judgement about God. 'But his will is free.' – Yes, but his power is beyond our grasp.

In understanding God's will as free we would not thereby have to understand this as entailing that he can freely will just anything – the implication appears to be that God couldn't freely will to bring about a change in those things that he has willed (nonetheless freely). This would then secure the eternity (necessity) of the truths made eternal by God's creative act, since God would not be free to undo those things he has willed to be unchangeably so. It would also make clear the way in which God was not necessitated to bring about just the things that he did bring about (even the eternal truths).

As La Croix puts it, just because Descartes is committed to the claim that 'God was not *antecedently* determined or limited in his creation of the eternal truths or the law of contradiction' it does not follow that 'God is not *subsequently* determined or limited by them in the creation of what he creates.' (p. 42).

Conclusion

And so are we, at last, able to say something about the relationship between God facts and other facts? All the necessary truths *about* God are eternally true, in an absolute sense – that this is so is so because, necessarily, God is eternally and immutably so. All the other necessary truths arise out of God's understanding and will, and thus are eternally and immutably true in virtue of God's decrees, and hence not in an absolute sense. That God made them so is not something that we can say had to be so. But in making them so, God has made them necessarily so. Further, to come back to an earlier question, it looks on this reading that Descartes *is* attributing to the God facts a 'higher' modal status than other facts.

And this, I think, is what makes sense of the claim made by Descartes in the letter to Mersenne (6 May 1630, quoted above) concerning the dependence of the eternal truths on the 'most eternal truth'.

Now, admittedly there is still some mystery in the claim that God might not have made the eternal truths true – and not merely in the sense of 'didn't instantiate them',

but, as suggested by Descartes elsewhere, also in the sense of ‘could have brought about their opposites’. But this mystery just appears to be one of the consequences of thinking about the divine attributes. While it makes perfect sense to us to say that God, being God, was in no way bound to do this rather than that, it is not something we can adequately grasp. That is to say, we can conceive of God being unconstrained in his creative acts, but not really conceive of what it would be for God to choose to have done otherwise. Now this does not mean that we have to conclude that there is some sense in which the necessary truths thereby depend on what we can and cannot conceive, it simply means that the contents of God’s understanding and the limitlessness of his will are things, in detail, unknowable to our minds (being finite creatures). Further, in making us the sorts of beings who can grasp necessary truths it would follow, of course, that we could not conceive of their falsity because nothing, after all, could possibly make them false (not even God, now that he has decreed them eternal).

So, being the sorts of beings we are, there is bound to be at least some mystery connected with our understanding of God. But, on this understanding of God’s relationship to the eternal truths, we do not have to conclude that the concept of God is an incoherent one (at least not for reasons that depend on his creation of the eternal truths).

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¹ In what follows I will use the phrase 'eternal truths' to signify what modern authors more usually refer to as necessary truths, since this seems to be exactly what Descartes had in mind.

² The antecedent of a conditional claim (an 'if...then...' claim) is the part that follows the if and from which the consequent (the 'then...' part) is derived. So the antecedent is 'if God created the eternal truths' and the consequent 'then they are possibly not the case'.

³ Since Descartes requires God as a guarantor for his clear and distinct ideas.

⁴ I take it that those authors (e.g. Wilson (1978), Bennett (1979), and Ishiguro (1986)) who argue that Descartes' account of modality amounts to an account of the limits of human reason (what Bennett calls the 'conceptualist' account) are also, in some sense, denying the existence of necessary truths – although not all of them would agree with me on this point (Bennett robustly denies such a charge, see esp. pp170-2 (*op. cit.*)).

⁵ Modal claims are claims concerning necessity, possibility and impossibility. Roughly, something is necessarily the case if it couldn't not be the case, possibly the case if it might be the case, and impossible if it couldn't be the case. Talk of contingent things is talk of things that are possibly not the case (i.e. things that might not have come to pass).

⁶ Does anything else exist necessarily? Well, in Meditation V, tying up the Ontological proof, Descartes says that he 'cannot conceive of anything other than God alone, to whose essence existence belongs of necessity.' I take it that, for Descartes, this is not simply a claim about the limits of his understanding, but a claim about what there is.

⁷ So the answer to the question, 'could God bring it about that something other than God had existence as part of its essence of necessity?' would seemingly have to be 'no'. More of this sort of issue later.

⁸ McFetridge (1990, pp 179-80) argues that Curley's iterated modality claim actually commits him to the Frankfurt 'no necessity' view.

⁹ Descartes in the quotation is talking about God's *existence* as the 'most eternal' truth, but I am assuming here that all the property facts are bound up with the existence fact (God being simple).

¹⁰ I leave to one side the question of whether this is the same thing as God's being omnipotent.

¹¹ Supposing, of course, that the 'anything' refers to 'anything dependent on God' rather than 'anything at all, including those things true of God, that he exists, and so on'.