

Descartes' Theory of Contingency¹

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In 1630, Descartes wrote a letter to Mersenne in which he stated a doctrine which was to shock his contemporaries... It was so unorthodox and so contrary to the prevailing theological opinion that Descartes was reluctant to make it public. The doctrine is that God is the creator of eternal truths.²

This doctrine of Descartes not only horrified his contemporaries, it continues to bring shudders to modern writers, including the author of the quote above. It has been passed over it seems by many commentaries on Descartes, but it is an interesting problem for which Descartes had a clear and consistent solution. His theory of eternal truths as dependent on the nature of God, and the nature of the world which was created by God, shows that eternal truths are dependent on God for their nature and existence, and that they are not purely arbitrary but consistent and immutable.

In showing that the eternal truths were contingent, Descartes made use of the doctrine of the creation of the world by God. This as he explains implies that God made the world freely and without compulsion. God must have perfect freedom to do anything, that is there is no reason or standard of right or wrong which limits him or sways his will one way or the other. "For it is self contradictory that the will of God should not have been from eternity indifferent to all that has come to pass or that ever will occur..."³ Since God made the world with no constraining influences, there could have been numerous possibilities in the way which the world was constructed. Descartes claims that we must use empirical evidence in determining the structure of the world, and not just reason, as the various possibilities must be eliminated, and this can only be done by examining the world.

We cannot determine by reason how big these pieces of matter are, how quickly they move, or what circles they describe. God might have arranged these things in countless different ways; which way he in fact chose rather than the rest we must learn from observation. Therefore, we are free to make any assumptions we like about them, as long as all the consequences agree with experience.⁴

He maintains that matter can assume only a limited number of forms, and that if we consider each one of them in turn we will come eventually to the form which has been used for the world. We will be sure of choosing the right one by empirical verification and not by reason.

¹ Originally published in *Anakainosis* 6 (December 1983) No 2, pp. 12-20.

² Leon Pearl. **Descartes**. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1977, p. 145.

³ Descartes. *Reply to Objections VI*. E Haldane and G Ross. **The Philosophical works of Descartes**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973. Vol 2, p. 248.

⁴ Descartes. *Principles of Philosophy*. Part 3, XLVI. E Anscombe and P T Geach. **Descartes: Philosophical Writings**. London; Nelson, 1969, p. 225.

...matter must successively assume all the forms of which it admits; and if we consider these forms in order, we can at last come to that which is found in this universe.⁵

Having demonstrated the contingency of the world as it has been structured in its creation, Descartes needs to show that the laws by which it is structured are also contingent. He has made statements which would indicate that he thought there are possible variations even within the structure of the laws as we know them.

After that I showed how the greatest part of the matter of which this chaos is constituted must, in accordance with these laws dispose and arrange itself in such a fashion as to render it *similar* to our heavens...⁶

So to demonstrate that the eternal truths themselves are contingent, he needs to show that there are possibilities for the creation which lie outside these laws or the eternal truths. To show this, an examination of the “cogito” can be used, and how its implications affect understanding of the eternal truths. “Nevertheless I have long had fixed in my mind the belief that an all-powerful God existed by whom I have been created such as I am.”⁷

Descartes can hold to a contingent creation consistently with his “cogito”, as it is itself founded in the contingency of his own being. In his search for a sure foundation for philosophy, he arrived at the “Cogito, ergo sum” as a way of demonstrating that while the world is possibly not real, at least his own existence was real and could be known for certain. This certainty was essential in a contingent situation; he had to be certain that something at least existed out of all the possible things which may exist. Clouser has shown that Descartes made use of a basic necessity of justifiable beliefs, that the conditions involved in arriving at the belief are consistent with the belief itself.⁸ While Descartes could have said “I do not exist” without making a logical error (That is, the opposite of “I exist” is not illogical) he could not have said it without destroying the conditions necessary for him to make it. That is, he had to exist so as to be able to say “I do not exist,” and his belief in that instance would be unfounded because of the circumstances needed to form it. Thus his “cogito” is justified in the sense that it is consistent with the state of affairs required for it to be stated, and thus is a practical beginning for him. This activity was required only because of the contingency of his own existence, and is justifiable. The opposite case, that he necessarily exists, is not consistent with the world as we know it to be. One proof of this is that Descartes no longer exists. (At least in the form required for him to state the “cogito”!)

Having demonstrated the contingency of his own existence, he had no barriers to extending his analysis of the world to include all things which God had created as contingent. In the **First Meditation**, he enquires how we are to know that the world does in fact exist, as all we are aware of are our perceptions of it. He demonstrates that it is

⁵ Descartes. *Principles of Philosophy*, Part 3, XLVII. Anscombe and Geach, p. 226.

⁶ Descartes. *Discourse on method*. Haldane and Ross, Vol. 1, p. 108. Emphasis added.

⁷ Descartes. *Meditation 1*. Haldane and Ross, Vol. 1, p. 147.

⁸ R Clouser. “Dooyeweerd’s metathetical critique and its application to Descartes and Heisenberg.” Toronto: Institute for Christian Studies, p. 3ff.

possible that universal deception has led us to believe the world exists, when in fact there is nothing there at all. He answers with his statement concerning the goodness of God, who would not permit us to be deceived about the world in which we find ourselves, but that the contingency of such a world is manifest in the alternatives which he postulates. He maintains that “it would also appear to be contrary to His goodness to permit me to be sometimes deceived, and nevertheless I cannot doubt that He does permit this.”⁹ Thus while maintaining that the goodness of God is inconsistent with universal deception, it is not inconsistent with partial deception, as it is apparent that we are sometimes deceived and yet God remains supremely good.

Having shown that the world is merely a contingent entity and not a necessarily existing thing, Descartes then needs to show that “eternal truths” are a part of the contingently created world and not separate from it. His “cogito” once again provides something of the answer. He begins his systematic doubt by taking as a rule that only that which we clearly and distinctly perceive is true, and that this is certain only because God exists, and that he is a perfect being, and that all that is in us issues from Him.

For to begin with, that which I have just taken as a rule, that is to say, that all the things that we very clearly and very distinctly conceive of are true, is certain only because God is or exists, and that He is a Perfect Being, and that all that is in us issues from Him. From this it follows that our ideas or notions, which to the extent of their being clear or distinct are ideas of real things, issuing from God, cannot but to that extent be true.¹⁰

He accepts that the guarantee of the truth of his perceptions is the perfection of God, who is the origin of all that we are aware of. He maintains that the extent to which our perceptions are true is the extent to which they are issuing from God concerning real things. The imperfections of human nature introduce an element of confusion and obscurity to the perfect ideas which issue from God.

So that though we often enough have ideas which have an element of falsity, this can only be the case in regard to those which have in them somewhat that is confused or obscure, because in so far as they have this character they participate in negation-- that is, they exist in us as confused only because we are not quite perfect.¹¹

He maintains that the idea of imperfection issuing from God is repugnant, and explains the imperfection of human perception as the lack of absolute perfection in the human subject of perception and not in the perceiving or in the thing being perceived.

⁹ Descartes. *Meditation 1*, Haldane and Ross, Vol. 1, p. 147.

¹⁰ Descartes. *Discourse on method*. Haldane and Ross, Vol. 1, p. 105.

¹¹ Ibid.

And it is evident that there is no less repugnance in the idea that error or imperfection, inasmuch as it is imperfections, proceeds from God, than there is in the idea of truth or perfection proceeding from nought.¹²

Thus all perfect ideas must originate with God who ensures the certainty of our perceptions.¹³ Since he has maintained that the world is real and made by God, and that we perceive in it magnitude, extension and position, these perceptions must also originate in God. Thus things such as number and shape are created things, and are perceived as part of the world around us by the goodness of God, and not because of any necessary existence of such things in themselves.

When we analyse Descartes' idea of mathematical truths, we find that these are part of the laws which God has established for the creation. The idea of God, which he requires to guarantee his knowledge, is the foundation for his idea of mathematical truths. Koyre states Descartes' view thus: God being the guarantee of the truth of ideas must originate them and not coexist with them as things sufficient in themselves. Thus an atheist in not accepting God has no (theoretical) foundation for his assurance of anything.¹⁴ So the mathematical truths are created by God and guaranteed by him. God is the cause of all positive reality, and it is not as if mathematical entities stand in utterly independent eternal relations, but they are ontologically contingent creatures just as our minds are.¹⁵ In Scholastic thought mathematical truths were independent of God's will, but dependent on his essence. Aquinas taught that the eternal truths were ideas in the mind of God, and so God's knowledge of them was not knowledge of subject matter alien to his being. However, orthodox opinion held that eternal truths were not created by God as they were independent of the divine will.¹⁶ Descartes, however, claims that imagining mathematical truths to be independent of God is universal,¹⁷ and that number and all other universals are simply modes of thought.¹⁸ The proof for the autonomy of the laws of nature was the expression of them as eternal truths, and that God is conceived to be bound by them. But Descartes thought that men were overawed by an idol of their own making, yet one to which the divine power was being asked to submit. He wanted to de-autonomise them by making them dependent on God.¹⁹

Descartes, in his letter to Fr Mesland, said that by removing limits on God's power we can understand how God could make a triangle with more than three angles, equal to two right angles. Mind is finite and created in such a way that it can conceive of things which God chose to be possible, but not of things which God could have made possible but in fact impossible. Nothing can have obliged God to make it true that contradictions cannot be together, and that consequently he could have done the contrary. We are sure of this,

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Introduction, Anscombe and Geach, p. xiii.

¹⁵ Descartes. *Meditation 1*, Haldane and Ross, Vol. 1, pp. 146f.

¹⁶ Pearl, pp. 145-146.

¹⁷ Descartes. *Second Letter to Mersenne*. Anscombe and Geach, pp. 260-261.

¹⁸ Descartes. *Principles of Philosophy*. Part 1, LVIII, Haldane and Ross, Vol. 1, p. 242

¹⁹ James Collins. **Descartes' Philosophy of nature**. Oxford: American Philosophical Quarterly, Monograph Series, No.5, 1971, p. 11.

says Descartes, that it is true, but we are unable to understand it. Though God chose some truths to be necessary we cannot say that he chose them necessarily.²⁰

Thus once God had chosen the laws which he would use in the creation of the world, these laws then hold for every world which God creates.²¹ However, as these laws are contingent in themselves, they have only become necessary once God has begun creating on that basis. Having chosen his laws, he uses them consistently throughout. Thus while God in the first place sets up the laws, and as they are therefore contingent, to the created worlds for which those same laws hold, they appear necessary, and any alternative systems of natural laws appear both absurd and impossible. In his **Letter to Arnaud**, Descartes maintains that it is not impossible for God to make two and three equal to something other than five, but that the mind which he has given us is such that it is consistent with the world of which it is a part.²² In his **First Letter to Mersenne**, Descartes states that the laws of nature are set up in the same way that a King sets up laws in his Kingdom. They are not immutable, but changeable just as a King can change his laws.²³ In the Discourse, he maintains that the laws are imprinted on our minds so that we cannot doubt their being observed in all that exists or is done in the world. In this he is claiming that men are created beings who are placed in a created world and are subject to the same laws. God has not made men to comprehend or exist by a different set of laws than that which holds for the natural world, due to his benevolence in not wanting us to be confused. The entire structure of the world and all that it contains is internally consistent. Thus in comprehending the world, we can see it only as according with the way God has structured it. We are made so as to be able to understand the world we live in. Collins describes Descartes' view of natural laws as follows:

Neither the universality nor the immutability of the laws of nature ceases to be participative and dependent in respect to the creating-conserving God. Hence divine freedom and stable laws of nature do not cancel each other out, but rather are related as creative source and effective expression.²⁴

And again he states

In freely establishing formal laws of nature, God also specifies *how* they will regulate the world: universally and immutably. The act whereby God determines the broadest laws of nature and communicates them to matter is characterised as free, infinitely powerful, and immutable in sustaining what has been freely determined for regulating mechanical movements.²⁵

²⁰ Anscombe and Geach, p. 291.

²¹ Descartes. *Discourse on method*. Part 5. Haldane and Ross, Vol. 1, p. 108.

²² Pearl, p. 146.

²³ Anscombe and Geach, p. 259.

²⁴ Collins, p. 49.

²⁵ Ibid.

Leon Pearl complains, however, that God is still in the arbitrary activity of declaring one truth to be contingent and another necessary.²⁶ He maintains that it is only the arbitrary choice of God which determines truth. However, as I have shown, Descartes does not claim that God acts purely arbitrarily in establishing truth, but that all natural laws, mathematical truths and so on are contingent, and are necessary only from the point of view from within the created order for which they hold. The inconsistency of which Pearl accuses Descartes (and God!) does not hold up under examination, as God does not, according to Descartes, establish a random collection of laws with no coherence, but a system of laws which is internally consistent and which then holds throughout the universe. Kenny agrees with Descartes, that having established the laws of nature they are then consistent. This is based on the nature of God as benevolent, and thus is proof for their continued validity.

But might not God have immutably willed that at a certain point in time the laws might change--just as Descartes wrote to Mesland that God contingently willed the laws to be necessary? If this possibility is to be ruled out, not only God's immutability but also God's veracity must be appealed to. God would be a deceiver if, while giving me such a nature that I perceive these laws as immutable, he had also decreed that the laws were to change. So the veracity of God is not only sufficient, but also necessary, to establish...the permanent validity of clearly and distinctly perceived truths.²⁷

Pearl claims that God could be deceiving us about truth, as it is only an arbitrary choice which determines what truth is. However, once again, the norms for truth are established by God and hold throughout the universe, and so truth is in a sense arbitrary, in that it is dependent solely upon the free and unhindered choice that God makes of a contingent law-order to be established and maintained. God cannot then deceive us concerning truth as we are aware from within the created order only of truth as it has been established by the created norms. Were God to try to deceive us, having once established the created order, we would be aware of the fact that he was attempting to impress upon us something that was inconsistent with the rest of the order which he upholds. Thus God cannot deceive us concerning truth, as to do so he would have to be inconsistent with his own nature of benevolence.

Can we then conceive of a world in which the natural laws are other than those which apply here? Descartes claims in the **Discourse on Method** that had God created other worlds, he could not have created any in which the natural laws do not hold as they do here. Any such new worlds must arrange themselves so as to be similar to this world. Gravity, tides and elements all appear as they do here.²⁸ He claims that had God simply made chaos, and established the laws, the world would have come about in such a fashion as it is now found. Does this mean that there is a contradiction in Descartes

²⁶ Pearl, p. 147.

²⁷ A Kenny. "The Cartesian circle and the eternal truths." *Journal of Philosophy* 67 (1970) p. 699.

²⁸ Descartes. *Discourse on Method*. Part 5, Haldane and Ross, Vol. 1, p. 107ff.

thinking between his theory of the establishment of the natural laws by God, and his inability to make another world alongside this one which would be radically different to it? It may appear so, but this is not the case. Descartes is claiming that once God has established the laws, and made the universe in accordance with them, should God wish to add to his creation that too will be consistent with what he has already made.

Once God has established laws of nature, they hold for any further creative activity which he performs. They are not thus eternal and binding upon God, but he remains consistent in all that he makes. It is for the benefit of man that the world is a consistent part of God's creation. Thus it is consistent for Descartes to claim that natural laws are contingent, but that also once having been established, they hold for all further activity so as to be a consistent whole. Koyre supports Descartes in this, maintaining that the sovereignty of God implies and explains his absolute freedom and omnipotence. God created the world freely, and could if he chose abstain from creation. He could also, had he chosen to do so, have made quite a different world, with another geometry and mathematics, but he would then have had to give us a different set of innate ideas to match it.²⁹

Regarding mathematical truths, Descartes claims that they were established by God and depend upon him entirely as created entities.

Mathematical truths, which you call eternal, were established by God and depend upon him entirely like all other created beings. In truth, it would be speaking of God like a Jupiter or Saturn, making him subject to Styx and the Fates, to say that these truths are independent of him.³⁰

We thus comprehend them as eternal and immutable not because they are such in themselves but because we cannot comprehend all that God is and can do, and because they are the truths which hold for us, and do not contain the possibility of confusing us.

Descartes also shows that the eternal truths are true because God knows them as true, and not because they were true in themselves.

...eternal truths...are true or possible only because God knows them as true or possible; they are not, contrariwise, known to God as true as though they were true independently of him... [We cannot say] that the truth about something is antecedent to God's knowledge of it; for in God knowing and willing are but one thing; so that from the very fact of his willing something, He knows it, and for this reason alone is such a thing true.³¹

His willing something, and his knowing it, are the same thing: neither is prior to the other, and thus what he wills, he knows to be true. Here Descartes differed from scholastic interpretations, especially voluntarism. The main doctrine of voluntarism was

²⁹ Introduction. Anscombe and Geach, pp. xli-xlii.

³⁰ Descartes. *First Letter to Mersenne*. Anscombe and Geach, p. 259.

³¹ Descartes. *Second Letter to Mersenne*. Anscombe and Geach, p. 260.

that willing was prior to and superior to reasoning. Peter Damian (1007-1072) thought that the human reason was useless in theology, as the laws of logic are valid only by the concurrence of God's will, and so God could make true the things which the reason rejects. Ockham taught that God was not limited by standards of good and evil, but that these standards were established by God, and thus the divine will is the origin of moral standards.³²

Descartes, however, did not accept this, as he thought that man grasps ideas with the reason, and the will then either assented to or dissented from that which was grasped. The reason was paramount, even though willing was more extensive than reasoning. The source of error, according to Descartes, was that the will sometimes assented to things which the reason had not grasped.³³ The problem of why men do not acknowledge the truth as dependent on God and not true in itself, is the result of men being able to grasp mathematical truths, but that they ignore their dependence upon God as He is incomprehensible. Descartes then maintains that as God is far greater and surpasses human understanding, whereas mathematics does not, then the lesser must depend upon the greater and not the other way round.³⁴

However, there are other differences between Descartes and voluntarist theories. Descartes thought that God is the origin of all laws including moral ones, and that these laws were established when God created the world. They are not only dependent upon the will of God but also on his benevolence. They are not arbitrary in the sense of being capricious. He differed from Damian, in that while the laws of logic are made true by God, he could not make something true which the reason rejects, as the reason itself is subject to the laws of logic and thus operates consistently with them. Kenny, however, thinks there is no proof that Ockham and Duns Scotus extended the idea of voluntarism further than moral truths, and thus did not include mathematical, metaphysical and logical truths in their theories.³⁵

Descartes claims that since God is the total and efficient cause of all things created, he is the cause of the eternal truths which he has established. He claims that the essence of created things is the eternal truths, and since God is the author of the essence of things, he must have created the eternal truths. They are real things, and thus have an origin as all real things are contingent. Once again he maintains that we cannot comprehend this as it is beyond our scope, but holds that it is possible to know that it is so. He holds that knowledge may be accurate but not exhaustively understood.³⁶ He maintains that if God had not created anything at all, there would be no eternal truths.³⁷ It appears that he is claiming that since the eternal truths are the essence of things, the lack of created things would mean the lack of their necessary essence, and thus the eternal truths would not only not exist, but that they would not even be necessary. They are thus contingent.

³² Voluntarism – Theological. **Encyclopaedia of Philosophy**. Vol. 8, p. 271.

³³ Descartes. *Meditation IV*. Haldane and Ross, Vol. 1, p. 175.

³⁴ Descartes. *Second Letter to Mersenne*, Anscombe and Geach, p. 261.

³⁵ Kenny, p. 695

³⁶ Descartes. *Third Letter to Mersenne*. Anscombe and Geach, p. 262.

³⁷ Descartes. *Fourth Letter to Mersenne*. Anscombe and Geach, p. 263.