

# Descartes's Ontology of the Eternal Truths

# 3

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## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

In the Fifth Meditation Descartes writes that he finds in himself “innumerable ideas of certain things, which, even if they perhaps do not exist anywhere outside of me, cannot, however, be said to be nothing” (AT 7: 64, CSM 2: 44). He discusses geometrical entities, and he contends that even if physical triangles don’t exist (the existence of the physical world is still up in the air at this point in the *Meditations*), the essence of true and immutable nature of a triangle is something. But now the question is: what exactly are such essences supposed to be, what is their ontological status? Descartes identifies essences with eternal truths.<sup>2</sup> And, famously, he held that God creates the eternal truths: whether 2+3=5 was entirely up to God—a view that raised eyebrows among Descartes’s contemporaries as it does now. So we can also put the question another way: what does God create when he creates the eternal truths? Descartes was strikingly quiet about this question. Similarly, and perhaps for this reason, while there is a sizable literature on Descartes’s view that God creates the eternal truths, interpreters have rarely addressed the question of their ontological status.

<sup>1</sup> This paper originated as a comment on Vere Chappell at the 1996 conference on Descartes at the University of California at Riverside. I am indebted to Vere for inspiring me to think about these issues and for being a source of inspiration in many ways over the years. I owe a special debt to Paul Hoffman for suggesting that my response contained the seeds of a paper in its own right. It has benefited from presentation at meetings of the Kansas Philosophical Society and the Midwest Seminar in Philosophy, and to the Philosophy Departments of the University of Toronto, the University of Massachusetts Amherst, and Queens University. I am very grateful to Marilyn Adams, Martin Pickave and Peter King for help with the medieval material Paul Hoffman and Gideon Yaffe provided very useful and thought provoking comments in the final stages.

<sup>2</sup> Letter to Mercene, May 27, 1630, AT 1: 152; CSM 3: 25. For discussion see Chappell 1997, 124–125, and also Schmalz 1991.



The Fifth Meditation is distinctly Platonist in flavor, and so it is tempting to hold, with Anthony Kenny, that Descartes was a Platonist on the issue: the eternal truths are Platonic ideas, that have their being separately from God and us. In the *Principles*, on the other hand, Descartes sounds like a conceptualist: the eternal truths, Descartes seems to suggest, exist only in our minds (*Principles* I.49, 59). Accordingly, Martial Gueroult saw Descartes as strongly non-Platonic, and Alan Gewirth detected both Platonic and Aristotelian tendencies in Descartes. Recently, Vere Chappell has also offered a defense of a conceptualist interpretation.<sup>3</sup>

I will argue that the eternal truths, the essences God creates, are not simply concepts in human minds, and that some sort of Platonism is strongly suggested by various aspects of Descartes's view. I will use the term "Platonism" to refer to the view that the essences have some sort of being beyond human minds as well as particular created substances (and their modes). But what sort of Platonism? The view I will defend is closest to one offered by Tad Schmaltz, who locates the eternal truths in the divine mind. I will, however, offer reasons for my position that are almost all different from the ones Schmaltz offers, and whereas Schmaltz argues that the eternal truths are identical with divine decrees,<sup>4</sup> acts of the divine will, I will propose that they are the contents of such decrees; they have objective being in God's mind. Or, to speak more intuitively, *essences* have objective being in God's mind.<sup>5</sup> We may, perhaps a bit crudely but conveniently, call this a moderate Platonism: the eternal truths have a form of being external to human minds as well as to the entire creation, but not external to God. This view is importantly distinct from outright Platonism—the view that essences exist separately from human minds, the creation, as well as God.

One reason for taking this interpretation seriously is the historical background, in particular Aristotelian Scholastic discussions of the ontological status of essences in relation to God's knowledge. One may be puzzled by the idea of tracing a form of Platonism to a tradition usually labeled as Aristotelian. But that tradition in fact contains significant Platonist elements: Duns Scotus is the most prominent proponent, and in some respects the originator of the view that essences have objective being in God, a view that received much attention. There are important differences between Descartes and the scholastic predecessors I will discuss on the eternal truths—most notably his view that God creates them. But in my view Descartes was like Scotus in thinking that essences, or eternal truths, have objective being in God's mind.

In the first section I will argue for some sort of Platonist interpretation as opposed to a conceptualist interpretation. Section II contains a sketch of some relevant scholastic background. In section III I explore the idea that for Des-

cartes the eternal truths have objective being in God's mind. In section IV, I will discuss some problems for this interpretation, and conclude, in section V, with a discussion of the conceptualist passages in the *Principles*. I will argue that these passages address questions other than the ontology of the eternal truths that figure in Descartes's doctrine that they are God's creation.

## I • PLATONISM OR CONCEPTUALISM?

Let me begin with the Fifth Meditation. Descartes's discussion here has indeed a strong Platonic flavor. The crucial passage reads as follows:

I find in me innumerable ideas of certain things, which, even if perhaps they exist nowhere outside me, cannot, however, be said to be nothing; and although they are thought by me in some way at will, they are not made up [*figuratur*] by me, but they have their true and immutable natures. So that, for example, when I imagine a triangle, even if perhaps such a figure does not exist and never has existed anywhere outside my thought, there is, however, a certain determinate nature [of a triangle], or essence, or form, which is immutable and eternal, and which has not been made up by me, and does not depend on my mind. (AT 7: 64, CSM 2: 45)

Despite the Platonic flavor of this passage, however, Descartes's claim about the ontology of natures or essences is very vague: even if triangles don't exist, there *is something*, there is an immutable and eternal nature. But what kind of being does this entity have? So I agree with Chappell who writes that nothing in the Fifth Meditation "amounts to an explicit statement that triangles have any being apart from human minds."<sup>6</sup>

Descartes does say that the essence of a triangle is not dependent on his mind. But really the point he is making is this: we don't make up truths about triangles, these truths impose themselves on us. What he has in mind, no doubt, is his view that our knowledge of triangles is innate. But that point is compatible with Chappell's conceptualist interpretation; for it is compatible with the view that God creating the eternal truths merely consists in his making it the case that we have these innate ideas and not others.<sup>7</sup> So when Descartes says that triangles and the like "cannot, however, be said to be nothing," is he suggesting nothing that goes beyond conceptualism? Some have thought, in line with conceptual-

3 See Kenny 1970, Chappell 1997. For more conceptualism, see Gewirth 1970, 678, Gueroult 1984 v. II, 277, and Alquié 1965-1973 v. III, 126, Nolan 1997.

4 Schmaltz 1991, 144-145.

5 It seems awkward to speak of truths having such being. The identification of eternal truths with essences may strike one as puzzling. But this is less puzzling, if one considers that an essence, of, say, a triangle, embodies a truth or a set of truths that constitute the nature of triangles.

6 Chappell 1997, 126.

7 Descartes also states the independence of the eternal truths from our minds in the Sixth Replies: "And moreover it must not be thought that the eternal truths depend on the human intellect, or on existing things, but on God alone, who has instituted them from eternity as supreme legislator" (AT 7: 436, CSM 2: 294). While this text does not clearly state a merely epistemological independence, I think it is also not clear enough to support a specifically ontological interpretation.



ism, that Descartes means that essences have objective being in our minds.<sup>8</sup> I find such a reading of the Fifth Meditation strained. But we need not rely on an examination of that elusive text alone to settle the issue.

Descartes's exchange with Gassendi about the Fifth Meditation provides a clearer picture; for it is clearly understood between them that Descartes was no conceptualist. Gassendi read the Fifth Meditation as expressing something other than conceptualism, and committing Descartes to the existence (or some form of being) of essences outside the human mind. He criticizes this view and writes: "I do not want to stop here: I only wish to suggest that it seems hard to claim that there is some immutable and eternal nature besides almighty God" (AT 7: 319, CSM 2: 221). Gassendi was a conceptualist,<sup>9</sup> and he proceeds to argue that we abstract the concept of a triangle on the basis of our experience of, say, triangles, and that it is not the case that in addition there is a true and immutable nature of a triangle. So, Gassendi argues

The triangle is a kind of mental rule, which you use to determine whether something deserves to be called a triangle. But we should not say that such a triangle is some real and true nature outside [*praeter*] of the intellect. For it is the intellect alone which after seeing material triangles has formed and made this common nature, as I explained for human nature. (AT 7: 321, CSM 2: 223)

Now if Descartes were no Platonist of any sort, and a conceptualist, he should accept at least part of what Gassendi says. While surely rejecting his empiricism, he should agree with the rejection of natures outside our intellect. But he simply does not do so. Instead, in response to Gassendi's objection to the idea that "there is any true and immutable nature besides God," he writes that this is indeed a problem if "the question would concern an existing thing [*re existens*], or if I had only posited something that is immutable in such a way that its immutability does not depend on God" (AT 7: 380, CSM 2: 261). So Gassendi took the Fifth Meditation to be a statement of something other than conceptualism, of some sort of reality outside the human mind, and Descartes accepted this interpretation.<sup>10</sup> This strikes me as a strong reason against seeing Descartes as a conceptualist.

<sup>8</sup> See Nolan 1997, Gouhier 1987, 296, and Wells 1990, 47-49, 61. Alquié denies that the phrase "not nothing" refers to objective being. Alquié 1963-1973, v. II, 470, n. 2.

<sup>9</sup> For discussion of the exchange between Descartes and Gassendi see Osler 1995.

<sup>10</sup> The view that the being of the natures merely consists in objective reality in the human mind also is puzzling in light of an exchange with Caterus. Caterus compared Descartes's ontological argument with the version of the argument criticized by Aquinas. Descartes responds that the argument Aquinas criticized started with the idea of existence in the mind, whereas his own started on the basis of a clear and distinct perception of something belonging to a true and immutable nature (AT 7: 115/CSM 2: 82-83). This contrast is undermined if the true and immutable nature is simply an objective being in a human mind. (For Descartes objective being is not existence, but that distinction does not affect the present point.)

So much for the Fifth Meditation. Let me now turn to three important reasons independent of the Fifth Meditation for ascribing some form of Platonism rather than conceptualism to Descartes. As Chappell writes, on a conceptualist interpretation "for Descartes, God's creation of numbers and figures *consist* in his creation of minds containing the ideas of numbers and figures" (p. 125). But in the letter to Mersenne of April 15, 1630, Descartes's discussion of eternal truths suggests otherwise:

Don't be afraid to assert and publish everywhere, I ask you, that God has established these laws in nature, just as a king establishes his laws in his kingdom. And there isn't any particular one that we could not comprehend if our spirit brings itself to consider it, and they are all inborn in our minds, just like a king would impress his laws in the hearts of his subjects, if he had as much power to do so. (AT 1: 145, CSM 3: 23)

The most natural reading of this response is that Descartes sees God's decreeing the eternal truths as distinct from his imprinting them on our minds. God and kings both establish laws, but only God, and no king, has in addition the power to imprint his laws in the hearts of his subjects.<sup>11</sup> And on various occasions Descartes presents a picture that distinguishes these truths from our knowledge of them: God creates the world in accordance with the eternal truths—this seems to presuppose such truths—and teaches us that he has done so. Descartes speaks of those truths "according to which God himself has taught us that he has disposed all things in number, weight and size (measure)" and he notes that "if God had created several Worlds, [these truths] would have been as true as in this one" (AT 11: 47, CSM 1: 97). (See also *Discourse* 4: 41, CSM 1: 131.)

One might object that for Descartes's God the creation of the truths and the implanting of the relevant innate ideas should be one and the same act insofar as there is reason to think that God does everything in one act. But still there is a difference in the effects of God's creative activity, its enactment. So there is a difference between the coming to be of the eternal truths and the coming to be of our innate ideas of them: it seems reasonable to think that Descartes believed that these truths "were something" before any of us was born. His distinction

<sup>11</sup> This is the most natural reading of the passage. Paul Hoffman and Gideon Yaffe have suggested to me that it is possible to read the passage in accord with a conceptualist reading. On my interpretation in the first sentence of the quote, Descartes compares God to the kind of king that actually exists. Such a king can establish laws, and Descartes suggests God does so too. Then he goes on to address the issue of our knowledge of the eternal truths and suggests that God has imprinted them on our minds, just as a king would do with his laws if he could. But unlike God, a king cannot, in addition, do so. Thus God's act of establishing laws is presented as distinct from the act of imprinting. Alternatively, one could propose that Descartes is actually comparing God to an unusual kind of king, a king who establishes the laws by imprinting them on our minds. But that reading strikes me as very strained: given that such kings don't exist, the analogy would be much less helpful. Surely Descartes means to illuminate his view of God's creation of the eternal truths by means of a comparison with a familiar kind of king.



between God creating the world in accordance with these truths and his teaching us these truths seems to confirm this picture.

Furthermore, there are two philosophical reasons for favoring some sort of Platonic interpretation. First, Descartes speaks of *eternal* truths, but how can we understand them as such if they are just ideas in our minds? Surely Descartes did not think that human minds have always been around. Consequently it is not clear in what sense the eternal truths would be *eternal*, on the conceptualist view, since on that view they depend on human minds ontologically. Chappell proposes that we must conclude that "the objects and the truths of mathematics are not, for Descartes, strictly and literally eternal."<sup>12</sup> But this strikes me as an awfully high price to pay, given Descartes's repeated description of these truths as eternal.

A Platonic or moderate Platonic interpretation does not have this problem. I don't think, however, that Descartes was an outright Platonist. In the Fifth Replies he implies a denial of *existence* for the true and immutable natures, and I take this denial to be directed at outright Platonism. I will return to this point below. And this leads to the third reason for ascribing some sort of Platonism, in particular, a moderate Platonism, to Descartes. Chappell and Nolan argue that the eternal truths have objective being in human minds. Neither seriously considers the possibility that they have objective being in *God's* mind. But if God decreed these truths from eternity, doesn't Descartes's philosophy of mind suggest that they, or more intuitively, the relevant essences, should have objective being in God's mind—just as they do in ours, when we know these truths?<sup>13</sup>

This question does not arise only from the doctrine of the creation of the eternal truths; if God merely knew them eternally as opposed to creating them, it would seem that they would also have to have objective being in his mind, according to Descartes's own philosophy of mind. In the Third Meditation he argued in a perfectly general way that for ideas we can distinguish between their formal and objective reality, where objective reality derives from the object of thought having objective being in the mind: the objective reality of the thought of God derives from God existing objectively in the mind. The continuity between human and divine minds in Descartes's thought is further confirmed by the fact that he saw his use of the term "idea" as an extension from its traditional use in analysis of God's thought to the realm of human thought. He makes this explicit in a reply to Hobbes: "I have used this word [idea] because it was already commonly used by philosophers to signify the forms of the perceptions of the divine mind, although we recognize no imagination in God's mind" (AT 7: 181,

CSM 2: 127).<sup>14</sup> So it seems natural to think or at least consider seriously the possibility that the eternal truths have objective being in God's mind.

## II • ESSENCES AND ETERNAL TRUTHS IN ARISTOTELIAN SCHOLASTICISM

A number of scholars have connected Descartes to his scholastic background for the notion of objective being, but to my knowledge, none have explored this notion for the question of the ontology of the eternal truths and they have focused on objective being in human minds.<sup>15</sup> In fact, however, the notion of objective being played an important role in accounts of divine knowledge. God knows everything, including essences, and the medievals generally thought that God does so by way of ideas. But what are ideas? I will sketch a rough picture by way of a contrast with Plato. Plato held that essences consist in what in English we now call the Forms, the medievals called Ideas. These are entities existing in themselves, eternally, and separately and independently from God. For the medievals the source in Plato was the *Timaeus*.<sup>16</sup> God creates on the basis of from a Christian point of view this picture was unacceptable: it is not possible for entities to exist as distinct and eternal independently from God. So, the Forms or Ideas, were moved into God's mind.

But now the question was: what are these ideas in God's mind and what is their relation to God himself? Augustine and Anselm identified them with the divine essence.<sup>17</sup> Later philosophers thought that some distinction from God's essence was called for, in particular in light of the fact that there is a multiplicity of distinct ideas, and God is simple. Aquinas and others in the thirteenth century held that ideas are distinct by reason from God's essence.<sup>18</sup> But Scotus held that they are (what he called) formally distinct from God, a distinction different from the real and modal distinction as well as the distinction of reason. It would

<sup>14</sup> There is no suggestion in Descartes that he withdrew the term from application to God: his point is the extension of the term to human thought. The crucial phrase is: *iam triam erat a Platone*. The CSM translation is less clear because it does not translate *iam*. Thus the suggestion in that translation does not make clear that Descartes's use is continuous with the past application to God: "... it was the standard philosophical term used ...". The French approved by Descartes is clearer: "Il était déjà communément reçu par les philosophes ..." (Alquié 1963-1973 II, 612). Wells refers to Cronin as claiming that Descartes "agonously rejects the doctrine [of objective being] of Suárez" with respect to God (Wells 1967, 50). He refers to Cronin 1966, 56). But Cronin has in mind is Descartes's subordination of the eternal truths to God's will and creative activity, not the ontology of the truths.

<sup>15</sup> For this part of my paper I am indebted to Adams 1987 which offers a clear account of discussions in the thirteenth and fourteenth century. I will add connections to Suárez.

<sup>16</sup> *Timaeus*, 30c-34c, 37c-38d, 51e-52d.

<sup>17</sup> Adams 1987, 1035. For discussion of Augustine and other medievals see also Janowski 2000.

<sup>12</sup> Chappell 1997, 127.

<sup>13</sup> Nolan never mentions the possibility that the eternal truths have objective being in God's mind. Chappell writes that "for Descartes, any entity that is not actual is an objective being, and hence requires the existence of at least one human mind" (126). But he offers no arguments for the claim that objective being requires the existence of a *human* mind. In correspondence he has cited the threat to divine simplicity, which I discuss below.







As for the eternal truths, I say again that they are true or possible only because God knows them as true or possible, not that they are known by God as true as if they are true independently of him. If men really understood the sense of their words well, they could never say without blasphemy that the truth of something precedes the knowledge that God has of it since in God willing and knowing are the same, so that from the very fact that he wants something he knows it and for this reason alone is such a thing true—*vera*. (AT I: 149, CSM 3: 24)

You ask what God does to produce [the eternal truths]. I say that he created them in virtue of the fact that he willed and understood them from eternity. Or (if you only use the word "create" for the existence of things) he disposed them and made them. For it is the same in God to will, know, and create without one preceding the other not even by reason. (AT I: 152-153, CSM 3: 25-26)

So Descartes firmly rejects the idea that God's understanding essences precedes his creative activity. This is clearly a major departure from what we found in Scotus. But this difference does not rule out the possibility that Descartes thought they have objective being in God's mind. He might hold that God's understanding/willing/creating the truths gives them objective being in God as a result of efficient causality.

Furthermore in Descartes' remarks about the eternal truths we can see echoes of some of the same concerns and views we found in the scholastics. We saw that in the Fifth Meditation, Descartes wrote that the eternal truths are "not nothing." And he writes to Mersenne: "God is the author of all things, the [eternal] truths are something, and consequently he is their author" (AT I: 152, CSM 3: 25). Descartes holds that God created the eternal truths, and that God is the total and efficient cause of the eternal truths. In light of the view we find in Scotus one might well think that Descartes has in mind that God makes them exist and that they might therefore be existing entities external to human minds.<sup>28</sup> And it may suggest the production of entities distinct from and external to God.<sup>29</sup> This observation has fueled the Platonic interpretation<sup>30</sup> and figures in Chappell's rejection of Schmalz' moderate Platonic interpretation: surely the eternal truths must be distinct from God if God creates them, he writes.

But there is ample reason to think that Descartes did not mean to endorse outright Platonism. He makes clear that the creation of the eternal truths does not result in their existence, which is significant in light of the scholastic connection between Platonism and existence. One example is the exchange with Gas-

sendi, who had written that it is hard to understand "that there is any true and immutable nature besides God" (AT 7:319, CSM 2: 221). Descartes responded that this is indeed a problem if either of two conditions obtains: "if the question would concern an existing thing [*re existente*], or if I had only posed something that is immutable in such a way that its immutability does not depend on God" (AT 7: 380, CSM 2: 261). Descartes proceeds to respond at some length to the second of these problems, but the first is the one that is relevant here. It is an expression of the scholastic concern with the Independence Problem: the *existence* of eternal and immutable entities other than God would pose a problem, Descartes claims. He clearly thinks he is not in trouble on this score, and so he implies that he had not committed himself to the existence of the true and immutable natures. Indeed, in the Fifth Meditation he had contrasted the existence of a triangle with its nature having some sort of being.<sup>31</sup>

He also repeatedly draws a distinction between the creation of the eternal truths and the creation of existing entities, acknowledging the traditional connection between creation and existence. Thus, as we saw, when he stated his view that God creates the eternal truths he noted: "or (if you attribute the word *creata*' only to the existence of things) *that he established them and made them*" (AT I: 152-3, CSM 3: 25-26. See also AT 7: 436, CSM 2: 294). Descartes's rejection of full-fledged existence for the eternal truths fits the idea that they have objective being, since clearly for Descartes objective being is *not* real, or actual, existence. Thus his argument for God's existence in the Third Meditation moves from God having objective being in our thought to his existence.

Given the disagreements in scholastic philosophy about the notion of objective being, we now need to determine what this notion meant for Descartes. My discussion will be brief. Much literature has been devoted to Descartes's notion of objective being; at the same time, some questions relevant to the present issue will have to remain unanswered. Interpreters who have explored the scholastic background have traced Descartes's notion of objective being to Scotus, and written that Caterus's objections to Descartes's notion assume that Descartes was following Scotus. Indeed, it is safe to say that this is the established opinion.<sup>32</sup>

The most important texts for this issue are the Third Meditation and the exchange with Caterus in the First Objections and Replies. In his well-known discussion in the Third Meditation Descartes proposes that we must distinguish for an idea between its formal and its objective reality. As modes of the mind, ideas all have the same level of reality formally. But they vary with respect to

<sup>28</sup> For the point that the ordinary notion of creation concerns the *existence* of entities see also Bethier 1967, 199.

<sup>29</sup> Chappell 1997, 124.

<sup>30</sup> Kenny 1970, 696.

<sup>31</sup> Kenny labels Descartes a Platonist despite the fact that Descartes denies full-blown existence for the eternal truths. I use the term Platonism differently, in part because the scholastics connected Platonism with *existence* distinct from God. This is a terminological difference with Kenny. But there is also a substantive difference: Kenny does not locate the eternal truths in God, but sees them as having a different mode of being, of a Meinongian variety. Thus they have their being outside both God and other minds.

<sup>32</sup> Normore 1986, Renault 2000, Armogathe 1995, 42, Dalbecz 1929, 464-472, Gilson 1984, 209, Marjorie Grene 1991, 12-15, Wells 1990, 50.



their content, and the level of objective reality they contain depends on their content. Specifically, ideas of modes, finite substances and God contain increasingly higher levels of reality objectively; Descartes also speaks of entities existing objectively in the mind. The level of objective reality of an idea is determined by the nature of the object that has objective reality in the mind in virtue of that idea: for instance, the level of objective reality of the idea of a horse is the same as the level of formal reality a horse has if it exists.<sup>33</sup> And he claims that the objective reality of an idea requires a cause—a claim that is significant for our purposes. He argues that it requires a cause that contains at least as much reality (formally or eminently) as the idea does objectively. For “although that mode of being by which a thing is objectively in the intellect through an idea is imperfect, it is not indeed nothing at all, and so it cannot come from nothing” (AT 7: 45, CSM 2: 29). Hence he argues that the idea of God requires God’s existence, given the infinite level of objective reality this idea contains.

A point that will be important for our purposes is this: the cause of the objective reality of an idea can be the subject of that idea. Descartes writes that his own mind can be the cause of its ideas of corporeal entities because these ideas contain no more reality than his mind *qua* substance does (AT 7: 43–45, CSM 2: 29–31). And this does not mean merely that his mind can cause the level of reality of the idea without causing its content, without producing the relevant objective being itself: that would not be sufficient to justify the conclusion that the mind itself can cause the ideas of corporeal entities with respect to their objective reality, a conclusion Descartes seems willing to draw.

Caterus objects that objective reality requires no cause. The reason is that on his view objective being is merely an extrinsic denomination and not a thing at all—*extrinseca denominatio, nihil rei* (AT 7: 92, CSM 2: 66–67). It merely means that an act of the intellect terminates in an object. Like Ockham, and unlike Scotus, Caterus does not think that there is some sort of being really in the intellect: the act of the intellect terminates in the object itself, and that is the end of the story.<sup>34</sup> Descartes understands Caterus’s objection. He responds that Caterus “considers the thing itself insofar as it is posited outside the intellect, for which it is clearly an extrinsic denomination that it exists objectively in the intellect” (AT 7: 102, CSM 2: 74). Next Descartes proceeds to distinguish between the sun itself existing outside the mind, and the sun as it has objective being in the mind.

33 This raises the question how the levels of objective reality relate to the idea that objective reality is a diminished form of reality. I take Descartes’s claim for objective reality as a diminished form of reality to express the following idea: for an entity *x* to exist objectively in a mind is less than for that same entity to exist formally. But then how should one compare, for instance, the objective reality of God in a mind to the formal reality of a mode? I am not sure how to answer this question. It is important in regard to Scotus’s aim to preserve divine simplicity in the face of a multiplicity of objective beings in the divine mind. It is also significant, however, that objective reality is different in kind from formal reality. I briefly address that point below.

34 Caterus’s objections are connected compellingly to Ockham by Renault 2000. Others have connected Caterus’ views to Suárez (Wells 1990) or Aquinas. See references in Renault 2000.

He is not particularly illuminating about the latter form of being: he repeatedly explains “objective being signifies nothing other than to be in the intellect in that way in which objects tend to be in it” (AT 7: 102, CSM 2: 74–75).

But what becomes clear is this: Descartes, like Scotus, recognized some distinctive mode of being in the mind for objects of thought. Scotus referred to this *esse cognitum* as a form of *esse diminutum*. Descartes also saw objective being as an inferior form of being, and spoke of things as being in the mind *tantum objective*—merely objectively (AT 7: 41–42, CSM 2: 29). And he writes that objective being in the mind “is much less perfect than that [form of being] by which things exist outside the mind” (AT 7: 103, CSM 2: 75). Furthermore, he agrees that an objective being is not an actual being—*ens actu*. It is worth remembering that for Scotus and Descartes objective being is different in kind from real existence: it is not simply a lower level of the same kind of being.

In light of these considerations, the view that for Descartes essences or eternal truths have objective being in God’s mind in Scotus’s sense has considerable virtues to recommend itself. First, Descartes is clearly committed to the category of objective being. This is an advantage of my interpretation over a more Platonic interpretation that in effect adds a new ontological category to Descartes’s thought.<sup>35</sup> And the view that the eternal truths have objective being in God’s mind seems to fit nicely into Descartes’s various remarks about their status. Unlike the view that they have objective being only in human minds, this moderate Platonic view accommodates their status as eternal, and fits Descartes’s presentation of God’s creation of these truths as separate from his imprinting them on our minds. At the same time the view meets Descartes’s concern to avoid the claim that the eternal truths have real existence distinct from God, the Independence Problem.

#### IV • OBJECTIONS AND REPLIES: SIMPLICITY AND CAUSATION

Let me now turn to some important problems for my moderate Platonic interpretation. Doing so will help clarify the suitability of the notion of objective being for the job I am proposing for it.

(1) *Divine Simplicity*. Chappell argues that a moderate Platonic interpretation poses a problem for divine simplicity. While Chappell states the objection quite briefly, this is quite a complicated matter. First of all, as I explained, Scotus’s notion of objective being was supposed to avoid this problem. Objective being is a low level form of reality which was supposed to be compatible with God’s simplicity. Thus at first sight it might seem that this objection needs to be worked out by arguing that objective being can’t do for Descartes the job Scotus assigned to it. But the best approach to the question is different; we need to apply Descartes’s theory of distinctions to the issue.

35 As Kenny does. See note 31 above.



Descartes employed three different types of distinction: real distinction, modal distinction and distinction of reason. Presumably the objective beings in God's mind are distinct from God and each other in some sense. So we now have two questions: which of these applies to the objective beings in the divine mind, and which of these would pose a threat to divine simplicity for Descartes? Clearly the real distinction would; it generates a multiplicity of separable parts. And surely Descartes does not allow for a real distinction to apply to God or what is in God. So, unsurprisingly, in the *Conversation with Burman* Descartes says that "whatever is in God, is not really distinct [*realiter distinctum*] from God himself" (AT 5: 166, CSM 3: 348). Indeed, the real distinction is the only one that poses a clear threat to the simplicity of a substance, it alone generates a distinction of parts that is incompatible with it. Descartes regarded the human mind as simple, it has no really distinct parts, unlike matter—any piece of matter (*Principles* I.60, *Meditations* AT 7: 85–86, CSM 2: 59). But in fact, the modal distinction is not a live candidate either: Descartes does not allow for modes, in a strict sense, in God; the reason he gives is that God is not changeable (*Principles* I. 56, and letter to an unknown correspondent of 1645 or 1646, AT 4: 349, CSM 3: 280). So now the question is this: is the view that the eternal truths have objectively reality in God's mind compatible with the idea that within God at most distinctions of reason apply?

Scotus had held that objective beings are formally distinct from God's essence (and, I presume, from each other), but the formal distinction was not part of Descartes's apparatus. In the First Replies he identified it with the modal distinction, but later he explained that in that context he had not distinguished between the modal distinction and the distinction of reason (*Principles* I. 62 and the 1645/46 letter cited above, AT 4: 349, CSM 3: 280). He now classifies the formal distinction as a distinction of reason, albeit a distinction of reason *rationata*—that is, with a foundation in things—*fundamentum in rebus*. Descartes explains this *fundamentum* as follows:

It seems to me that there is no difficulty in this matter unless we do not distinguish sufficiently between things that exist outside our thought and ideas of things which are in our thought. Thus when I think of the essence of a triangle and of its existence, these are two thoughts insofar as they are thoughts. Insofar as they are thoughts, even taken objectively, they differ modally, taking the term in its strict sense. But it is not the same for a triangle existing outside of thought for there it seems to me evident that essence and existence are in no way distinct, and the same goes for all universals. Thus when I say "Peter is a man" the thought by which I think "Peter" differs modally from the thought by which I think "man", but in Peter himself there is nothing other than the man who is Peter. (AT 4: 350, CSM 3: 280–81)

This passage is useful for several reasons. First, it offers an interpretation of the formal distinction as a distinction of reason. Second, it offers an explanation of Descartes's conception of the distinction of reason: he suggests that there

is really no distinction within the entity to which we apply the distinction of reason, a triangle or Peter, but only within our thinking. Neither of these points was novel; Suárez discusses this view and finds it a plausible interpretation of Scotus, in particular for the application of the formal distinction to God's attributes. There is, on that view, a *fundamentum in re*, but perhaps only in the sense that the distinction is virtually in the relevant thing (DM VII.1.13).<sup>36</sup>

Finally, in this letter Descartes applies his theory of distinction to thoughts objectively taken. Two thoughts, one about the essence of a triangle and the other about its existence, "insofar as they are *thought even objectively taken*, differ modally, taking the term 'modal' strictly" (AT 4: 350, CSM 3: 280, emphasis added). Descartes is talking here about thoughts *in us*, which are different modes of our minds. And it is clear this view will not carry over to God: he is explicit about using his strict notion of modal distinction, which does not apply to God since God has no modes. Consequently, there is not more than a distinction of reason between objective beings in God's mind. The *Conversation with Burman* confirms this picture: Descartes considers the question whether God's decrees could be separated from God, and he says not. He claims that there is only a distinction of reason between God and his decrees, because they cannot really be separated from him: "Even if we conceive that those decrees could have been separated from God, we can only conceive this as a sign and in consequence of our reasoning—in *signo et momento rationis*: which implies a mental distinction between God's decrees and God himself, but not a real distinction" (AT 5: 166, CSM 3: 348).

The picture that emerges is this: the eternal truths have objective being in God's mind. They are distinct by reason only from God himself and from each other. And the distinction of reason, for Descartes, is a distinction that does not correspond to a distinction within God, only between our thoughts about God. In the 1645/46 letter he makes clear that when we distinguish individual and universal, for instance, there is only a distinction of reason, and this means there is a distinction in our thinking, but not in the object thought about. There is just the man Peter. And so it must be for God.

Some commentators have denied that even a distinction of reason applies to God on the ground that Descartes claimed that "In God, willing, understanding and creating are all the same thing without one being prior to the other even by reason—*ne quidem ratione*" (AT 1: 153, CSM 3: 25–26). Descartes does not, however, here deny a distinction of reason, he merely denies any type of *priority* between willing, understanding and creating. It does not follow, however, that we cannot separate them in our thinking at all: we can have a thought about his willing that is distinct from a thought about his understanding. What we cannot do, or cannot do legitimately, is think that his understanding would *precede* his willing.

<sup>36</sup> Hoffmann writes that the following illuminates the formal distinction of ideas in God from God's essence: ideas in God's mind exercise exemplary causation on the human mind without thereby resulting in knowledge of God's essence (Hoffmann 2002, 168). So the ideas are distinct from God's essence in virtue of their effects.



To approach the point from a different angle, since Descartes identifies the question of distinctions between objective beings with the question of distinctions between acts of thought, the view that the eternal truths have objective being in God's mind adds no new problems about simplicity to Descartes's conception of God. Descartes does of course hold that God understands/wills/creates the eternal truths, and he holds that these acts are distinct from God by reason, in spite of the fact that they are free, and do not, according to Descartes, emanate from God like the rays from the Sun" (letter to Mersenne, May 27, 1630, AT 1: 152, CSM 3: 25). But no new questions arise about the sense in which there is a multiplicity in God if we attribute to him the view that the eternal truths have objective being in God's mind.

(2) *Caution.*<sup>37</sup> Chappell argues against Schmalz's moderate Platonic interpretation on the ground that it is incompatible with God creating the eternal truths. So they must be external to God.<sup>38</sup> We already saw, however, that Descartes allows a thinking subject to be the efficient cause of objective beings in its thoughts. Furthermore, Descartes applies the term efficient causality to both objective beings and eternal truths. He speaks of the "total and efficient cause" of the objective reality of an idea (AT 7: 40, CSM 2: 28, and see also AT 7: 366, CSM 2: 252). And he writes that God is the efficient and total cause of the eternal truths, although he acknowledges that this label is not entirely straightforward. He writes that the type of causality at stake was probably not contemplated by thinkers who classified the types of causality. He speaks of efficient causality, but, he specifies, "in the same sense in which a king is producer of laws, even if the law itself is not a physically existing thing, but only as they say, a moral being" (AT 7: 436, CSM 2: 294).<sup>39</sup>

One might find still that special problems arise because of Descartes's view that God not only thinks but creates the eternal truths. It might seem odd to think that God *creates* objective beings in his own mind. But as we just saw, Des-

cartes qualifies his description of God's activity with respect to the eternal truths as creation. His point in speaking of creation is that God freely decides what the eternal truths are rather than being bound by such truths.

So I think these objections do not supply grounds for rejecting the interpretation I am proposing, but I do find the resulting view philosophically puzzling. The problem I see already arises for God's decrees, however, regardless of the question of the ontological status of the eternal truths. As Burman suggested, there is something puzzling about the idea that God's decrees are merely distinct by reason from God in Descartes's sense, even though God is "indifferent" with respect to them (AT 5: 166, CSM 3: 348). Descartes himself repeatedly claimed there is much about God we cannot presume to understand. Indeed, in response to Burman's query about this issue Descartes reportedly said: "But these things are not for our reason to know, and we must never indulge or permit ourselves to subject God's nature and operations to our reason" (AT 5: 166, CSM 3: 348).<sup>40</sup>

#### V • THE PRINCIPLES

The most serious problem comes from the *Principles*, where Descartes certainly sounds much like a conceptualist. I will argue, however, that in the relevant parts of the *Principles* Descartes is in fact concerned with questions different from the one we have been addressing. At *Principles* I.49 Descartes writes:

When we recognize that it cannot happen that something comes from nothing, this proposition: *ex nihilo nihil fit*, is not considered as some existing thing or mode of a thing, but as some eternal truth, *quibus habet in se sua in our mind*, and it is called a common notion or axiom (emphasis added).

At *Principles* I.59 Descartes does not refer to eternal truths, but discusses universals:

These universals arise only from the fact that we use one and the same idea to think about all individuals that are similar to one another: just as we impose one and the same name on all things represented through that idea; which name is universal.... [W]hen number is considered not in any created things but only abstractly, or in general, it is merely a mode of thinking: just as is the case for all the other things we call universals.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Schmalz identifies the eternal truths with divine decrees, divine acts. Now this is philosophically quite puzzling: 243-5 is not a decree in the sense of an act, it is the *content* of a decree, which is constituted by the objective reality of the truth in God's thought. So we need the notion of objective being. And the issue of existence also distinguishes the eternal truths from God's decrees themselves. For his decrees as acts of the mind exist.

One might object that Descartes distinguishes between existence and objective reality only by distinguishing between taking ideas formally as opposed to taking them objectively. So in the end they are the same thing. But the importance of the difference is clear from his application of the causal principle: the cause of the objective being of the idea of God needs something that has at least as much formal reality as the idea of God has objectively. But qua idea taken formally, that is, as mode of the mind, the idea of God does not give rise to this demand.

<sup>38</sup> Chappell and Kenny write that the truths must be distinct from God. But in light of the different types of distinctions Descartes allows, we must specify what kind of distinction is at stake, and the point they have in mind would come down to the claim of a real distinction. I prefer to rephrase the point by saying that the truths must be external to God.

<sup>39</sup> For a very useful discussion of a relevant issue, see Carriero 1999, 143. Carriero explains how for Aquinas it was quite possible for a substance to be the efficient cause of its accidents, referring in particular to *Summa Theologiae* Part I question 77, article 6.

<sup>40</sup> See also the Sixth Replies, AT 7: 380, CSM 2: 261, and a letter to Mersenne AT 1: 152, CSM 3: 25. On the other hand, Descartes thinks we can know some things about God, and so one question is where we need to draw the line. See Schmalz 2000 for discussion of this issue in Descartes.

<sup>41</sup> Gewirth has gone so far as to read the passage as Aristotelian abstractionist, thus also going against Descartes's innatism (see Gewirth 1970, 678). This interpretation is implausible given Descartes's commitment throughout his career to innatism. Besides, the passage strikes me as



Descartes's examples include the idea of the number two and the idea of a triangle, mathematical ideas. This suggests that he is taking up the same issues as in the Fifth Meditation, but now committing himself to conceptualism, in contrast to what the exchange with Gassendi suggests.

Now the first thing to notice about these passages is what they aim to *deny*. Art. 49 explicitly denies that eternal truths *exist* outside our minds: they are not substances or modes. But the objective being of an eternal truth in God's mind does not mean that it exists. What is troubling, however, is Descartes's positive statement about the ontological status of an eternal truth in article 49: it has its seat in *our* mind. Has Descartes now come around to Gassendi's conceptualism?

At this point it is instructive to return to the scholastics. What we find there is separate discussion of two different issues: (1) the nature of the distinction of *res*; or essence and existence. Here we find various views: in a discussion of the distinction between a universal and a creature that instantiates it, the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries there was disagreement about whether they are really distinct, formally distinct—Scotus's view—or distinct by reason.<sup>42</sup> Later Suárez held that essences are distinct by reason from existence, and universals are so distinct, with a *fundamentum in re*, from creatures.<sup>43</sup> The other issue is this: (2) between the two issues is crucial, but might escape one's notice: one might think that if essences or universals have some sort of being in God, that settles all questions about their ontological status. The Aristotelians were convinced, however, that universals exist in creatures, and so Suárez writes that almost everyone agrees, universals are in things.<sup>44</sup> So being in God is not the whole story. I propose that the same distinction between the issues is at work in Descartes.

I will not be able to offer a full analysis of this part of the *Principles*, but the main point is this. In this part of the *Principles* Descartes is not at all concerned with the relationship between essences or eternal truths and God. He is laying out his ontology of the created world, and so he is concerned with the first of the two above questions. He explains that there are substances, modes, and then there are other items which do not belong in either of these two categories. Some of the items in question we do not think of as existing in creatures—such as “what is done cannot be undone,” or time when considered in the abstract and as distinct from duration. Those only occur in our minds. But items that we regard as existing in things external to the mind are merely distinct by reason from these things. Sometimes the way he phrases that view is that they only have their being in our minds. He sees the two as connected though, as makes

sense. Recall that in the letter to an unknown correspondent of 1645/46 Descartes wrote that a distinction of reason must have a *fundamentum in re*, but he explained there that this *fundamentum* consists in our having different thoughts about an entity which in itself contains no ontological complexity. (We distinguish in our thinking between Peter and his being a man, but in Peter himself there is no distinction between his being Peter and his being a man.)

So the claim that a distinction of reason obtains can be phrased in terms of the claim that there is no distinction within the object to which the distinction of reason is applied, but only in our thought: we generate a distinction by the way in which we think about things. And that, I propose, is what Descartes has in mind in art. 59 when he explains how universals arise.<sup>45</sup> This point comes out clearly in a discussion about the distinction between essence and existence in the 1645/46 letter. Descartes distinguishes here between modes and attributes, the latter being features of a substance without which it cannot exist, unlike the former:

Existence, duration, size, number and all universals, do not seem to me to be modes properly speaking, nor do justice, mercy in God. They are referred to by a broader term as attributes, or modes of thinking, because we understand the essence of a thing in one way when we abstract from the fact whether it exists or not, and in another way when we consider it as existing. (AT IV 349, CSM III 280)

This passage explains in what sense the universals “arise” from our use of a term: Descartes means to deny that the universals are distinct entities in the objects to which we apply them: there is not a number three in a set of three buffalo that is a distinct entity; that would result in a modal or real distinction. Rather we distinguish the number in our thought from the buffalo.

This contention is not, however, meant to address the ultimate origins of our ideas of universals. It takes off, as it were, at the point where we find ourselves using these ideas to distinguish in our minds between, for instance, numbers and the things numbered. At that point the question arises about the ontology of numbers and the like in things, *in rerum natura*. And then Descartes's claim is that there is no additional entity present, a number, in the things numbered.

But settling the question about the presence of number in things numbered does not settle the question about the eternal truths in relation to God. Even if Descartes thinks there is only a distinction of reason in the created world between the thing and the universal, that leaves open the possibility that essences have objective being in God's mind as a result of God understanding/willing/creating eternal truths about numbers. And finally God imprints knowledge of these truths on our minds in the form of innate ideas.

It may help to see the point by considering the following discussion in Scotus. Scotus criticized Henry of Ghent for holding a view that, as Scotus saw it,

compatible with innatism. It states that the universal arises from use of the same idea, but this is

vague enough to be compatible with various views on the origin of the idea.  
42 See Adams 1987, 16.

43 DM, XXXI, 1, 5.

44 He distinguishes this view from nominalism—while writing that the disagreement with the nominalists may be merely verbal (DM VI.2.1).

45 For this point see also Schmalz 1991, 132–134.



accords genuine actual being to essences before their creation. One objection Scotus raised was this: on that view, when God creates, he does something much less drastic than one might think. For the view implies that in creating God, simply adds existence to the essence. But "creation is production from nothing, *de nihilo*. And if a stone already had true real being—*esse verum reale*—then when it is produced by [God's] efficient causal power it is not produced from nothing—*de nihilo*" (Opus Oxon. I. d. 36 n. 3; Cronin 1966, 188). Suárez later made the same point (DM XXXI.2.4). Scotus's own view, of course, is that essences in God's mind have a diminished form of being, *esse cognitum*, *esse obiectivum*. This notion of being is such that creation is not merely the addition of existence to an already real essence. Crucial is here the idea that the *esse cognitum* of the essence in God's mind is of an entirely different kind from the being the essence has in the creature.

Interestingly enough, Gassendi raised the same objection against Descartes. After observing that it seems hard to believe that there is something eternal besides God, he writes:

The schoolmen say that it is one thing to talk of the essence of things, another to speak of their existence, and that their existence is not eternal but their essence is. But since the essence is the main feature of things, what is so great about God adding existence? (AT VII 319, CSM II 222)

Descartes does not specifically address this problem. In response to Gassendi's lengthy string of objections he simply made the point we saw before: he implied that he does not accord them existence and explained that he did not say the essences are immutable independently of God. But if he holds that they have only objective being, we can see why he might not be troubled. Like Scotus, he could respond that when God creates, he does not add existence to the antecedently real essences; their objective being does not carry over to the creatures.

In sum, from Descartes's claim that there is only a distinction of reason between essence and creature, or universal and creature, we cannot infer that we know the whole story of his view of the eternal truths, essences. Specifically, this claim does not entail a denial of objective being in God.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>46</sup> It is worth noting that while Descartes uses the term "eternal truths" in art. 48, in art. 49 he specifies that he is talking about "common notions or axioms". His example is *ex nihilo nihil fit*. Other examples are "it is impossible for the same thing both to be and not to be at the same time" (AT 4: 444/CSM 3: 290) and "whatever can do the greater can do the smaller" (AT 4: 111/CSM 3: 331). Common notions are not essences: they are very general principles. It is now not at all surprising if Descartes says that these eternal truths have their being only in our mind. It is hard to make sense of such very general logical principles having objective being.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper I have addressed the question of what ontological status Descartes accorded to the eternal truths or essences he believed God creates, and which he says are "not nothing" even if triangles and the like don't exist outside of him. I have argued that there is strong reason to ascribe to him the view that they have some sort of being outside of human minds. Furthermore, I have proposed that he thought they have objective being in God's mind. The exchange with Gassendi where Descartes accepted an eternal form of being for essences outside of human minds, confirms the Platonistic impression left by the Fifth Meditation. This form of being addresses the relation of essences to God's knowing and creating them. The *Principles* seem to suggest conceptualism, but I have argued that there Descartes is in fact addressing other questions: the status of various items other than substances and modes within the world of created existing entities. Objective being for the eternal truths or essences accommodates various important aspects of Descartes's view: it fits his philosophy of mind which contains a significant role for objective beings in minds, it accounts for the eternity of the truths, and it agrees with his view that essences have some sort of reality other than existence. While the literature on Descartes has neglected this interpretation, it should come as no surprise to those familiar with the scholastic tradition on these issues.

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