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Infimus gradus libertatis? Descartes on indifference and divine freedom¹

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Abstract: Descartes held the doctrine that the eternal truths are freely created by God. He seems to have thought that a proper understanding of God's freedom entails such a doctrine concerning the eternal truths. In this paper, I examine Descartes' account of divine freedom. I argue that Descartes' statements about indifference, namely that indifference is the lowest grade of freedom and that indifference is the essence of God's freedom are not incompatible. I also show how Descartes arrived at his doctrine of the creation of the eternal truths by consideration of the nature of God's freedom.

According to Descartes' doctrine of the creation of the eternal truths (hereafter 'the Creation Doctrine'), the eternal truths are freely created by God and depend completely upon Him. That is, not only does Descartes hold what I will call 'the Dependence Thesis' (i.e. that everything depends on God in such a way that if, *per impossibile*, God did not exist, nothing would exist or be true), he also holds that the eternal truths are such that God was free with respect to their creation. This 'Free-Creation Thesis' serves to differentiate Descartes' creation doctrine from the views of more traditional thinkers (e.g. Augustine, Aquinas, Leibniz) who held that the eternal truths depend on God but are not freely created. Descartes' God could have willed, for instance, *that* $2+2=5$ or *that a triangle has 5 sides*, and then those propositions would have been true.

Although much has been written in recent decades on Descartes' Creation Doctrine, scholarly attention has been rather narrowly focused on a small number of issues. Scholars have tended to focus on the search for the historical source(s) of the position which Descartes opposes or on the consequences the Creation Doctrine has for modality.² Despite the important work being done on those issues, this focus has had an unfortunate and presumably unintended consequence: it has taken much needed attention away from other, equally important, issues concerning the Creation Doctrine. In particular, Descartes' *reasons* for

holding the Creation Doctrine have been largely ignored.³ I will attempt to begin to remedy this unfortunate situation.

In the 27 May 1630 letter to Mersenne (AT, vol. 1, 151–153; CSMK, 25), after a brief statement of the Creation Doctrine, Descartes presents two reasons for it: the Doctrine of Divine Simplicity (the thesis that there are no parts and no composition in God) and divine freedom. I discuss the former reason elsewhere,⁴ so in this paper I will concern myself only with the latter reason.

From even a superficial examination of Descartes' discussion of the eternal truths we can see that Descartes held that God's freedom and the Creation Doctrine are intimately related. For instance, in the 3 June 1630 letter to Mersenne, Descartes writes that '[God] was free to make it not true that all the radii of the circle are equal – just as free as he was not to create the world'; (AT, vol. 1, 152–153; CSMK, 26). Descartes also discusses divine freedom and the eternal truths in the 2 May 1644 letter to Mesland, in which he states: '[T]he power of God cannot have any limits ... [this] shows us that God cannot have been determined to make it true that contradictories cannot be true together, and therefore that he could have done the opposite'; (AT, vol. 4, 118; CSMK, 235).

Although Descartes does not say as much about divine freedom as one might like, it is quite clear that he believes that God's freedom consists in a liberty of *indifference*.⁵ For instance, in the Sixth Replies, he states:

It is self-contradictory to suppose that the will of God was not indifferent from eternity with respect to everything ... because it is impossible to imagine that anything is thought of in the divine intellect as good or true, or worthy or belief or action or omission, prior to the decision of the divine will to make it so. (AT, vol. 7, 431–432; CSM, vol. 2, 291)

This account of divine freedom raises problems for any interpreter of Descartes, most obviously because Descartes simply does not provide any explicit account of this *divine indifference*. Moreover, another problem arises: Descartes' insistence that God's freedom consists in indifference is *prima facie* peculiar because it seems to be at odds with Descartes' statements about *human* freedom in the Fourth Meditation:

There is no need for me to be able to be moved both ways in order to be free [*Neque enim opus est me in utramque partem ferri posse, ut sim liber*]. ... [T]he indifference I feel when there is no reason impelling [*impellit*] me in one direction rather than another is the lowest grade of freedom [*infimus gradus libertatis*]; it is evidence not of any perfection of freedom, but rather of a defect in knowledge or a kind of negation. (AT, vol. 7, 57–58; CSM, vol. 2, 40)

Even setting aside the oddness of this passage with respect to Descartes' account of divine freedom, this passage is at odds with Descartes' insistence, most prominently in the *Principles* (AT, vol. 8A, 20; CSM, vol. 1, 206), that indifference belongs to human freedom. The question, then, is: how can Descartes consistently hold F₁, F₂, and F₃?

- F1 Indifference is not required for *human* freedom, and, in fact, indifference is the lowest grade of human freedom.
- F2 Indifference belongs to human freedom.
- F3 Indifference is the essence of *divine* freedom.

How can Descartes hold that something deficient for us both 'belongs' to our freedom and is the essence of the freedom of the most perfect being?

Concerning the compatibility of F1 and F2, one may argue, as Tad Schmaltz has, that Descartes simply changed his views from 1641 *Meditations*, in which he identifies human freedom with spontaneity, to the 1644 *Principles*, in which he seems to identify human freedom with indifference.⁶ This suggestion would certainly eliminate any incompatibility between F1 and F2: F1 would be indexed to 1641, and F2 would be indexed to 1644; thus, there is no incompatibility between holding different view of freedom at two different times. I think that this suggestion is both false and premature.⁷ I think it is *false* because Descartes clearly could have made appropriate changes to the text in the French translation of the *Meditations* in 1647, a translation which had his approval, to better reflect his views. He did not, in fact, do this. I think that it is *premature* to resort to this view because Descartes has an explanation of the consistency of F1 and F2, as we shall see, which does not require switching views.

In this paper, I shall do two things: first, I will show why Descartes holds F1, F2, and F3, and how he reconciles each with the others. And second, I will argue that Descartes believes that a proper understanding of divine freedom entails the Creation Doctrine. In the first part, I will discuss two different senses of 'indifference' found in Descartes' writings: the Scholastic Sense and another sense introduced by, and peculiar to, Descartes. We shall see that the term 'indifference' in F1 has a different sense from the sense it has in F2. So, there is no incompatibility between them. In the second part, I will address the issue of why Descartes thinks that F3 is true despite the fact that human indifference is 'the lowest grade of freedom'. Finally, I will show how the Creation Doctrine is entailed by Descartes' account of divine freedom.

Different senses of 'indifference'

The first step in a solution to the compatibility problem generated by Descartes' acceptance of F1, F2, and F3 is to notice that there are different senses of indifference in play in Descartes' writings. Descartes, as we know, was *at times* anxious to find favour with the Jesuits, and so he sometimes employed the Scholastic notion of indifference, accepted by the Jesuits.⁸ This sense of indifference is particularly prevalent in sixteenth-century Jesuits like Luis de Molina. In his *Concordia*, Molina defined freedom in terms of indifference. He states: 'That agent is said to be free who, all the requisites for acting having been posited, can act or not act, or so perform one action that he is still able to do the contrary',

(*Concordia*, Dis. 2). Let us call this type of indifference, ‘Scholastic-indifference’ (‘S-indifference’, for short) and present it as follows:

DS An agent A is S-indifferent with respect to an action α iff given all the requisites for doing α , A could have done α and A could have refrained from doing α , and A could have done some other action beside α .

It is S-indifference, ‘given currency for the first time by later Scholastics’,⁹ that Leibniz would famously oppose in the ‘Conversation with Steno’ (1677). As Leibniz states:

This notion of freedom – that is, the power of acting or not acting, all the requisites for acting having been posited, and all things being equal both in the object and in the agent, is an impossible chimera, which is contrary to the first principle [i.e. the principle of sufficient reason] that I stated. (VE, vol. 2, 302)

Not only does Leibniz think that S-indifference never actually occurs in human free actions, he thinks that it is *impossible* that any free action feature S-indifference. For an agent to be S-indifferent with respect to an action α , according to Leibniz, would require a violation of the Principle of Sufficient Reason. The sufficient reason for an action would be contained in ‘all the requisites for acting’, and given that there is a sufficient reason contained in ‘all the requisites for acting’, the action follows. Because the Principle of Sufficient Reason is a necessary truth, an action *cannot* be S-indifferent.

Descartes, however, discusses S-indifference in several texts, most noticeably in the 9 February 1645 letter to Mesland, in which he states: ‘Perhaps others mean by “indifference” a positive faculty of determining oneself to one or other of two contraries ... I do not deny that the will has this positive faculty’; (AT, vol. 4, 173; CSMK, 245).¹⁰ It should come as no surprise that this is stated in a letter to a Jesuit. S-indifference, as opposed to the other sense of indifference, to be discussed shortly, is a positive power or ability belonging to the will.

Sometimes, however, Descartes introduces his own sense of ‘indifference’.¹¹ In the Fourth Meditation, he writes of ‘the indifference I feel when there is *no* reason impelling [*nulla me ratio ... impellit*] me in one direction rather than another’, (AT, vol. 7, 58; CSM, vol. 2, 40, emphasis mine), and states that in some cases ‘my intellect has not come upon *any* persuasive reason in favour of one alternative rather than the other. This obviously implies that I am indifferent as to whether I should assent or deny either alternative’ (AT, vol. 7, 59; CSM, vol. 2, 41, emphasis mine). And, in the Sixth Replies, he states: ‘He is never indifferent except when he does not know which of the two alternatives is the better or truer’ (AT, vol. 7, 432–433; CSM, vol. 2, 291–292). Finally, in the 9 February 1645 letter to Mesland, he states: ‘indifference ... seems to me strictly to mean that state of the will when it is not impelled [*impellitur*] one way rather than another by any perception of

truth or goodness' (AT, vol. 4, 173; CSMK, 245). Descartes here means that an agent is indifferent in his peculiar sense when their will is not impelled by *any* reason for acting. Let us call this type of indifference 'Cartesian-indifference' (or 'C-indifference') and state it as follows:

- DC An agent A is C-indifferent with respect to an action α iff
- (1) It is not the case that A has any reason to do α or any alternatives to α , or
 - (2) the reasons for and against doing α are evenly balanced.¹²

In contrast to S-indifference, which is a power, C-indifference is a *state* in which an agent is not impelled by any reason to perform an action; it is, as Beyssade states, 'the *state* of hesitation or wavering because of ignorance or insufficient knowledge'.¹³ It is the state that Buridan's famous ass was in with respect to the equally appealing, equidistant bales of hay. Descartes explicitly contrasts C-indifference with S-indifference in the 2 May 1644 letter to Mesland. He states: 'And so, since you regard freedom not simply as indifference but rather as a real and positive power to determine oneself, the difference between us is a merely verbal one – for I agree that the will has such a power' (AT, vol. 4, 116; CSMK, 234). And it is C-indifference which Descartes characterizes as the lowest grade of freedom.¹⁴ As Descartes states in the 9 February 1645 letter to Mesland:

'[I]ndifference' in this context seems to me strictly to mean that state of the will when it is not impelled one way rather than another by any perception of truth or goodness [*cum a nulla veri vel boni perceptione in unam magis quam in aliam partem impellitur*]. This is the sense in which I took it when I said that the lowest grade of freedom is that by which we determine ourselves to things to which we are indifferent. (AT, vol. 4, 173; CSMK, 245)

So, differentiating between S-indifference and C-indifference shows how Descartes can hold that there is a sense in which indifference may belong to human free actions (S-indifference) although there is a sense in which it is the lowest grade of human freedom (C-indifference). C-indifference is the lowest grade of human freedom precisely because it is contrary to the highest grade of human freedom, i.e. spontaneous assent to a clear and distinct perception. As Descartes states: '[T]he more I am inclined [*propendeo*] in one direction ... so much more freely do I choose that. For if I always saw clearly what was true and good ... in that case, although I would be completely free, yet I could never be indifferent' (AT, vol. 7, 57–58; CSM, vol. 2, 40).

We should notice at this point what differentiating between S-indifference and C-indifference actually accomplishes: differentiating between the two is quite helpful in reconciling F1 and F2. That is, there is no inconsistency in Descartes holding that C-indifference is not required for human freedom, while S-indifference belongs to human freedom. However, distinguishing S-indifference

and C-indifference does nothing to help the situation between F₁ and F₃, because, as we'll see, the sense of indifference involved with both is C-indifference. So, we'll have to look elsewhere to settle this issue.

Why C-indifference is not essential to human freedom

In the 21 April 1641 letter to Mersenne, Descartes writes, 'I wrote that indifference *in our case* is rather a defect than a perfection of freedom; but it does not follow that the same is the case with God' (AT, vol. 3, 360; CSMK, 179, emphasis mine). Unfortunately, Descartes doesn't tell us *explicitly* why this is the case. However, there are some implicitly stated reasons, as we'll now see.

Descartes' reply to an objection from the authors of the Sixth Objections indicates many things about his strategy for reconciliation of F₁ and F₃. I quote his reply to the objection at length, and I number the sections in order to make reference easier.

- (1) As for the freedom of the will, the way in which it exists in God is quite different from the way in which it exists in us.
 - (2) It is self-contradictory to suppose that the will of God was not indifferent from eternity with respect to everything which has happened or will ever happen; for it is impossible to imagine that anything is thought of in the divine intellect as or true ... prior to the decision of the divine will make it so.
 - (3) But as for man ... it is evident that he will embrace what is good and true all the more willingly, and hence more freely, in proportion as he sees it clearly.
 - (4) He [i.e. man] is never indifferent except when he does not know which of the two alternatives is the better or truer, or at least when he does not see this clearly enough to rule out any possibility of doubt.
 - (5) Hence the indifference which belongs to [*convenit*] human freedom is very different from that which belongs to divine freedom.
 - (6) Indifference does not belong to the essence of human freedom [*indifferentia non pertinet ad essentiam humanae libertatis*], since not only are we free when ignorance of what is right makes us indifferent, but we are also free – indeed at our freest – when a clear perception impels us to pursue some object.
- (AT, vol. 7, 431–433; CSM, vol. 2, 291–292)

Each of the numbered sections in this passage contains helpful information concerning Descartes' views of freedom, both human and divine. (3) and (6), for instance, constitute strong evidence that Descartes held that indifference (both C-indifference and S-indifference) is not essential to human freedom. That is, there are cases in which a human agent will be free, in fact *freer*, the less indifferent she is. What is required for the freest human actions is spontaneous assent to a 'great light in the intellect'.

It should be noticed that (5) does state that a type of indifference, S-indifference, 'belongs' to human freedom. This, in conjunction with Descartes' statement in the 9 February 1645 letter to the Jesuit, Mesland, in which he states that humans are S-indifferent, and *Principles* I.41 in which Descartes seems to identify

freedom with S-indifference (AT, vol. 8A, 20; CSM, vol. 1, 206), would seem to indicate that Descartes, despite (6), held that S-indifference is essential to human free actions. What should be noticed is that in (5) and (6) Descartes says two very different things: first, S-indifference ‘belongs’ [*convenit*] to human freedom; second, S-indifference does not belong [*non pertinet*] to the *essence* of human freedom. Why the difference? The answer is that Descartes certainly believes that there are free human actions in which S-indifference is present, and this is the sense in which S-indifference may belong to free human actions; however, what Descartes is denying is that S-indifference is *essential* to free human actions.¹⁵ This should come as no surprise; after all, Descartes, as we have seen, repeatedly states that the *freest* human actions are those in which indifference (of both varieties) is missing.¹⁶

Most important to the present task of reconciling F1 and F3 are (1), (2), (4), and (5). (1) and (5) both clearly show that Descartes believes that there cannot be a uniform account of human and divine freedom. There are at least two obvious reasons why Descartes cannot hold a uniform account. First, as Descartes states: ‘no essence can belong univocally to both God and his creatures’ (AT, vol. 7, 433; CSM, vol. 2, 292). That is, not only does ‘*x* is free’ mean something different depending on whether we substitute the name of a creature or of God for *x*, it *cannot fail* to mean something different. The predicates of God and creatures are non-univocal.¹⁷ So, because of the non-univocity of divine and human predicates, Descartes is committed to the impossibility of a uniform account of divine and human freedom. Thus, *something* must distinguish human freedom from divine freedom.

Second, even if we denied the non-univocity of divine and human predicates, Descartes’ model of the structure of free human actions simply *cannot* accommodate divine free acts because of the Doctrine of Divine Simplicity (DDS). As Descartes states with respect to human free action: ‘it is clear by the natural light that the perception of the intellect must [*debere*] precede the determination of the will’ (AT, vol. 7, 60; CSM, vol. 2, 41).¹⁸ The priority of the intellect need not be temporal priority, but perhaps only ‘priority of nature’ or conceptual priority. However, Descartes thinks that ‘in God, willing [and] understanding ... are all the same thing without one being prior to the other even conceptually [*ne quidem ratione*]’ (AT, vol. 1, 153; CSMK, 25–26); and between God’s intellect and will ‘there is not even any priority of order, or nature, or of *ratione ratiocinata* as they call it’ (AT, vol. 7, 432; CSM, vol. 2, 291). Thus, because of Descartes’ commitment to DDS, in which there is no conceptual priority between God’s intellect and will, there simply cannot be a uniform account of freedom, which would accommodate both human and divine free actions.

(2) illustrates that God’s freedom requires C-indifference. I will return to this point shortly. (4) is the key to understanding why Descartes believes F1 and F3 are both true. (4) shows that, in discussing human indifference here, Descartes

intends to be discussing C-indifference.¹⁹ This will be clear when we discuss the necessary and sufficient conditions for being able to be C-indifferent below. In (4), Descartes states that humans can be indifferent if (and only if) they either lack knowledge or they lack clear perception. This seems to indicate that a state of not-being-impelled is being discussed rather than a power of choosing.²⁰ That is, Descartes is referring to C-indifference and not to S-indifference.

We can see why Descartes held that humans need not be C-indifferent with respect to an action α in order to be free with respect to α by noticing that he held that certain conditions must hold for an agent to be able to be C-indifferent; that is, conditions under which the conditions of DC could be satisfied. Descartes held the following:

- CI It is *possible* for a finite agent A to be C-indifferent iff
- (i) A lacks relevant information concerning a course of action,
 - or
 - (ii) A's perception is not sufficiently clear and distinct,
 - or
 - (iii) A acts without sufficient reason. (i.e. A acts with no reason, or with fewer reasons than ought to suffice for the action.)

Descartes expresses conditions (i) and (ii) in the Fourth Meditation: 'indifference [i.e. C-indifference] is evidence not of any perfection of freedom, but rather of a defect in knowledge For if I always saw clearly what was true and good, I should never have to deliberate about the right judgment or choice' (AT, vol. 7, 58; CSM, vol. 2, 40). Again, in the Fourth Meditation, he states: 'this indifference [i.e. C-indifference] does not merely apply to cases where the intellect is wholly ignorant, but extends in general to every case where the intellect does not have *sufficiently clear* knowledge' (AT, vol. 7, 59; CSM, vol. 2, 41, emphasis mine).

Descartes states condition (iii) in the 2 May 1644 letter to Mesland: 'I did not say that a person was indifferent only if he lacked knowledge, but rather, that he is more indifferent the fewer reasons he knows which impel him to choose one side rather than another' (AT, vol. 4, 115; CSMK, 235).

Now, for Descartes, (i)–(iii) of CI are indicative of a *privation* or defect on the part of an agent. Descartes uses the term 'privation' frequently in the Fourth Meditation to explain error, and, I believe, to explain material falsity in the Third Meditation. In the 1647 French edition of the *Meditations*, he insists that he is using the term 'privation' according to its Scholastic usage (AT, vol. 9, 48).²¹ The Scholastics, as we know, distinguished between a *negation* [*negatio*] and a *privation* [*privatio*]. A negation is simply a lack of something; so, for instance, my lack of wings is a negation. However, privations have *normative*

import. 'Privation', according to Descartes' Scholastic usage, may be defined as follows:

F is a privation in some thing S =_{df.} F is a lack of a property P in S, and S is such that it ought to have P.²²

So, whereas my lack of wings is a mere negation, if I were to lack feet or reason, I would have a privation.²³

That (i)–(iii) of CI are indicative of a privation, according to Descartes, is clear from Descartes' insistence that the lack of knowledge involved in C-indifference is described in the Fourth Meditation as '*in cognitione defectum*'. That this is the case is also clear from Descartes' account of error in terms of privation in the same Meditation: 'it is undoubtedly an imperfection in me to misuse [*non bene utar*] that freedom and make judgments about matters which I do not fully understand' (AT, vol. 7, 61; CSM, vol. 2, 42).

As I have argued elsewhere, Descartes believes that ideas ought to be clear and distinct.²⁴ If this is true, then an idea which is not clear and distinct is a privative idea, one which we ought not to have, or, at the very least, ought not to act upon. As he states: 'If, however, I simply refrain from making a judgment in cases where I do not perceive the truth with sufficient clarity and distinctness, then it is clear that I am *behaving correctly* and avoiding error' (AT, vol. 7, 59; CSM, vol. 2, 41).²⁵ It is also indicative of a privation in that we *misuse* our faculties (i.e. use them as we ought not to) when we have an act of will without sufficient reason for the act of will.

Thus, if (i)–(iii) of CI exhaust the ways in which a *finite* agent can be C-indifferent, then a finite agent can be C-indifferent only by having a privation. This, I believe, is why Descartes wrote to Mersenne that 'indifference in our case is rather a defect [*defaut*] than a perfection of freedom' (AT, vol. 3, 360; CSMK, 179). But Descartes thinks that freedom is a perfection:

... it is only ... freedom of choice, which I experience within me to be so great that the idea of any greater faculty is beyond my grasp; so much so that it is above all in virtue of the will that I understand myself to bear *in some way* the image and likeness of God. (AT, vol. 7, 57, emphasis mine)²⁶

He reiterates this in the *Principles*: 'it is a *supreme perfection* in man that he acts voluntarily, that is, freely' (AT, vol. 8, 18, emphasis mine). And in the Fourth Meditation, it is clear that Descartes thinks that it *ought* to be the case that humans act freely.

To see the problem, take the following three propositions:

- (A) Freedom is a perfection.
- (B) A finite agent A can be C-indifferent only if A is a privation.
- (C) C-indifference is necessary for human freedom.

If Descartes holds (A)–(C), then he is committed to (D):

- (D) A finite agent A can have the perfection of freedom only if A has a privation.

Although Descartes *does* believe that created agents are essentially *limited*,²⁷ it does not follow that he believes that we are essentially *privative*; in fact, he explicitly denies that we are essentially subject to a privation.²⁸ Because Descartes does not hold (D), he must give up one or more of (A)–(C). But we have already seen that Descartes holds (A) and (B); so, Descartes must reject (C). That is, Descartes cannot hold that C-indifference is necessary for human freedom. But the fact that C-indifference is not necessary for human freedom entails nothing about whether C-indifference is necessary for divine freedom because, as we've seen, Descartes believes that human freedom is quite dissimilar from divine freedom [(1) and (5)]. We must now see why Descartes believes that C-indifference is required for divine freedom.

Why C-indifference is essential to divine freedom

At the start of this section, we should notice not *why* Descartes holds that God's freedom requires C-indifference, but simply *that* he does. In (2), from the Sixth Replies passage, Descartes states: 'It is self-contradictory to suppose that the will of God was not indifferent from eternity ... for it is impossible to imagine that anything is thought of in the divine intellect as good or true ... prior to the decision of the divine will to make it so.' And later in the Sixth Replies, Descartes characterizes God indifference in terms of a lack of reasons for willing (AT, vol. 7, 435; CSM, vol. 2, 294). Thus, Descartes' God satisfies condition (1) of the criteria for being C-indifferent; hence, he is C-indifferent.

Moreover, Descartes holds that God is free *if and only if* God is C-indifferent. That Descartes believes that C-indifference is a necessary condition for divine freedom is beyond doubt; but it is as clear that he holds that C-indifference is sufficient for divine freedom. This can be shown if we consider that Descartes holds that divine freedom is simply a complete lack of determination with respect to God's will.²⁹ This can happen only if God is C-indifferent. But, moreover, *if* God is C-indifferent, there is a complete lack of determination of God's will; that is, there will be *no reason* for God's willing things. Hence, C-indifference is necessary and sufficient for divine freedom.

We may now turn to *why* Descartes holds that God is C-indifferent. Remember that Descartes thinks that the eternal truths are freely created by God. Descartes believes that God's free creation of the eternal truths requires that God's choice is not determined or impelled in any way by anything independent of God's will. Concerning an inquiry from Mersenne, Descartes states: 'You ask what necessitated God to create these [eternal] truths; and I reply that he was free to make it

not true that all the radii of the circle are equal – just as free as he was not to create the world' (AT, vol. 1, 152; CSMK, 25). Descartes states two important ideas in this passage: First, that God was not necessitated to create the eternal truths, i.e. He was free with respect to their creation. Second, he implicitly explains that this freedom involves the ability to have done otherwise. This second point is clear from the fact that Descartes thinks that God could have willed both of the following:

- R That it is false that all the radii of the circle are equal.
 W That it is false that the world exists.

But, as we know, God did *not* will either R or W to be true; in fact, the radii of the circle *are* equal, and the world *does* exist. Because Descartes believes that the truth of any proposition depends on God's will, he holds that the truth of the propositions *that all the radii of the circle are equal* and *that the world exists* are equally the result of God's will, though they differ in modal status. So, given that this is true, and that Descartes believes that God could have willed R and W, Descartes holds that God's freedom requires the power to have done other than He has in fact done. That is, God's freedom requires *something like* the positive power of S-indifference.³⁰ Thus,

- GF1 God is free with respect to willing α only if He could have refrained from willing α and He could have willed something else besides α .

Remember that I previously listed some necessary and sufficient conditions for being able to be C-indifferent. I left out one condition:

- (iv) There is *nothing* present to A's intellect prior to A's willing.

As we have seen in our very brief discussion of DDS, there is nothing true prior to God's will which could serve as a reason for divine willing. The reason I previously omitted (iv) is that in that context we were concerned only with *human* freedom, and Descartes holds that humans cannot possibly satisfy condition (iv), in virtue of the structure of human free actions.

Clearly, however, Descartes must believe that God satisfies (iv); after all, as we've seen, Descartes holds that God is C-indifferent, but He cannot be C-indifferent in virtue of satisfying (i), or (ii), or (iii) because they are indications not only of human privation but also of divine imperfection. Moreover, Descartes is *forced* to hold that God satisfies (iv) because Descartes is committed to GF1 and to the following:

- GF2 God can have the power to will otherwise only if God is C-indifferent. (That is, only if nothing impels His will.)

Because God could not refrain from willing what is true if truths were present to His intellect prior to His will, He must be C-indifferent if GF1 is true; and He can

only be C-indifferent in virtue of satisfying (iv). But, we know that Descartes believes that

(v) God has the ability to will otherwise.

Therefore, Descartes believes that

(vi) God is C-indifferent.

I have shown that Descartes cannot allow C-indifference to be required for human freedom, that Descartes is committed to divine freedom requiring C-indifference, and that there is no inconsistency involved with F1, F2, and F3.

Divine freedom and the eternal truths

Although there is clearly an important relationship between the eternal truths and divine freedom, there are only a few texts in which Descartes discusses this relationship. This, however, should not bother us, given the scarcity of texts in which Descartes discusses either the eternal truths or divine freedom and the scarcity of texts in which Descartes explains why he holds the Creation Doctrine. In every text in which Descartes discusses the reasons why he holds the Creation Doctrine, he mentions, either implicitly or explicitly, the issue of divine freedom. So, relatively speaking, Descartes discusses the relationship between the eternal truths and divine freedom quite frequently.

It is interesting to note that Descartes actually provides *two* arguments for the Creation Doctrine based on divine freedom. One, found in both the Sixth Replies and the 2 May 1644 letter to Mesland, argues for the Creation Doctrine *purely* on the basis of divine freedom. Another, which I will now briefly discuss before moving to the other argument, depends also on consideration of DDS. Descartes states: 'It is self-contradictory to suppose that the will of God was not indifferent from eternity ... because it is impossible to imagine that anything is thought of in the divine intellect as good or true ... prior to the decision of the divine will to make it so' (AT, vol. 7, 431–432; CSM, vol. 2, 291). In this passage, Descartes is arguing that God is indifferent *because* He is simple. We would not be wrong then in supposing that DDS is the more fundamental explanation of the Creation Doctrine for Descartes. Because there can be nothing in the divine intellect which is not also an object of the divine will (in virtue of the numerical identity of God's intellect and will), there can be nothing in the divine intellect prior to the divine will. But if there can be nothing in the divine intellect prior to the divine will, there can be *no reason* for God's willing what He wills. Thus, God is C-indifferent with respect to everything in virtue of satisfying condition (1) of DC. And if God is C-indifferent with respect to everything, then He is free with respect to everything. But the eternal truths are *something* (AT, vol. 1, 152; CSMK, 25). So, God is free with respect to the eternal truths. Thus, if there are eternal truths, they are freely willed by God. Therefore, if God is simple and free, the eternal truths are freely created.

The previous argument rests heavily on DDS as well as consideration of divine freedom. Descartes' second and more interesting argument is based purely on consideration of divine freedom. In fact, in this argument Descartes disregards DDS altogether. Descartes seems to be arguing against an imaginary opponent who objects to his heavy reliance on DDS. So, Descartes, in order to defeat even this opponent will argue that if, *per impossibile*, God were not simple and there were truths in the divine intellect prior to the divine will, God would not be free. Let us now turn to Descartes' words on the subject:

If anyone will attend to the immeasurable greatness of God he will find it manifestly clear that there can be nothing whatsoever which does not depend on him. This applies not just to everything that subsists, but to all order, every law, and every foundation of something's being true and good. If *this* were not so, then ... God would not have been completely indifferent with respect to the creation of what he did in fact create. If some reason for something's being good had existed prior to his preordination, this would have determined God to prefer those things it was best to do. (AT, vol. 7, 435; CSM, vol. 2, 293–294, emphasis mine)³¹

In this passage, Descartes begins with a reiteration of the Dependence Thesis: everything depends on God. After stating the Dependence Thesis, Descartes presents a *reductio ad absurdum* in which the contradiction is generated by a hypothetical denial of the Dependence Thesis ('If *this* [i.e. the Dependence Thesis] were not so ...'). Descartes argues that God would not have been indifferent (C-indifferent) if there could be something independent of His will. Moreover, if God were not C-indifferent, then His will would have been determined to will particular things. But if God would have been determined to will particular things, His will would not have been free. 'But his will is free', as Descartes states elsewhere (AT, vol. 1, 146; CSMK, 23). Hence, the hypothetical denial of the Dependence Thesis is false. Therefore, the Dependence Thesis is true. But if the Dependence Thesis is true and God's will is free, then the eternal truths are freely created by God.

I realize that a step in this argument requires some justification. The controversial premise is the following:

If God were not C-indifferent, then His will would have been determined.

Descartes does not provide *any* justification for this premise, but we can speculate about why he believed it was true. Why would God be determined to will exactly those things that were true or good prior to His will if, *per impossibile*, there were such things? Presumably, God could not fail to know which things were true or good prior to His will in virtue of His omniscience. Presumably, God could not fail to will those things which are true or good in virtue of His truthfulness and goodness.³² Therefore, if there were eternal truths prior to God's will, God would have been determined to will those truths. He would not have had the ability to will otherwise with respect to those truths.

I realize that much can be said against Descartes' thoughts concerning divine freedom and the creation of the eternal truths. However, in this paper, my intention has been merely to interpret Descartes' view accurately, not to defend it. I leave that for others.³³

Notes

1. In this paper, I employ the following abbreviations:
 - AT Descartes, René *Oeuvres de Descartes*, C. Adam and P. Tannery (eds) (Paris: J. Vrin, 1996) (cited by volume and page number).
 - CSM Descartes, René *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vols 1 and 2, J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch (transl.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) (cited by volume and page number).
 - CSMK Descartes, René *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 3, J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch, A. Kenny (transl.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) (cited by page number).
2. Lilli Alanen 'Descartes, Duns Scotus and Ockham on omnipotence and possibility', *Franciscan Studies*, 45 (1985), 157–188; *idem* 'Descartes, omnipotence, and kinds of modality', in P. H. Hare (ed.) *Doing Philosophy Historically* (Buffalo NY: Prometheus Books, 1988), 182–196; Jonathan Bennett 'Descartes's theory of modality', *Philosophical Review*, 103 (1994), 639–667; Timothy Cronin 'Eternal truths in the thought of Descartes and of his adversary', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 4 (1960), 553–559; *idem* *Objective Being in Descartes and Suarez* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1966); Edwin Curley 'Descartes on the creation of the eternal truths', *Philosophical Review*, 93 (1984), 569–597; *idem* 'A God who can do all things', unpublished manuscript (1998); Harry Frankfurt 'Descartes on the creation of the eternal truths', *Philosophical Review*, 86 (1977), 36–57; Hide Ishiguro 'The status of necessity and impossibility in Descartes', in A. Rorty (ed.) *Essays on Descartes' Meditations* (Berkeley and Los Angeles CA: University of California Press, 1986), 459–471; Dan Kaufman 'Descartes's creation doctrine and modality', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 80 (2002), 24–41; Richard LaCroix, 'Descartes on God's ability to do the logically impossible', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 14 (1984), 455–475; Calvin Normore 'Descartes' possibilities', in G. Moyal (ed.) *Descartes: Critical Assessments* (New York NY: Routledge, 1991), 68–83; James Petrik 'Descartes on divine indifference and the transworld validity of the eternal truths', *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 36 (1998), 417–432; James van Cleve 'Descartes and the destruction of the eternal truths', *Ratio*, 7 (1994), 58–62; Gijsbert van den Brink 'Descartes, modalities, and God', *International Journal of the Philosophy of Religion*, 33 (1993), 1–15; Norman Wells 'Descartes and the Scholastics briefly revisited', *New Scholasticism*, 35 (1961), 172–190; *idem* 'Descartes' uncreated eternal truths', *New Scholasticism*, 56 (1982), 185–199.
3. Frankfurt and Curley make some attempt to investigate Descartes' reasons for the Creation Doctrine.
4. Dan Kaufman 'Divine simplicity and the eternal truths in Descartes', *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* (forthcoming).
5. See AT, vol. 3, 360; CSMK, 179; AT, vol. 4, 118; CSMK, 235; AT, vol. 7, 431–433; CSM, vol. 2, 291–292.
6. Tad Schmaltz *Malebranche's Theory of the Soul* (New York NY: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 207–209.
7. Of course, anything false should be considered premature.
8. See letter to the Sorbonne (AT, vol. 7, 1–6; CSM, vol. 2, 3–6) and Vere Chappell 'Descartes's compatibilism', in J. Cottingham (ed.) *Reason, Will, and Sensation: Studies in Descartes' Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 181.
9. In an earlier version of this, Leibniz writes, 'by the Molinists' instead of 'by later Scholastics'. See Robert Sleigh 'Leibniz on divine foreknowledge', *Faith and Philosophy*, 11 (1994), 560; and Robert Sleigh, Vere Chappell, and Michael Della Rocca 'Determinism and human freedom', in D. Garber and M. Ayers (eds) *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 1259.
10. Cf. AT, vol. 8A, 20; CSM, vol. 1, 206; AT, vol. 4, 116; CSMK, 233–234.

11. See Chappell 'Descartes's compatibilism', 181–182; Anthony Kenny 'Descartes on the will', in R. J. Butler (ed.) *Cartesian Studies* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1972), 1–31; Joseph Keim Campbell 'Descartes on spontaneity, indifference and alternative', in R. Gennaro and C. Huenemann (eds) *New Essays on the Rationalists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 179–199.
12. See Chappell 'Descartes's compatibilism', 181. Chappell states that, according to the sense of indifference introduced by Descartes, 'an action is indifferent only if its agent has no reason to perform it or the reasons for and against it are evenly balanced'. Cf. Robert Imlay 'Descartes and indifference', *Studia Leibnitiana*, 14 (1982), 87–97.
13. Michelle Beyssade 'Descartes's doctrine of freedom: differences between the French and Latin texts of the Fourth Meditation', in Cottingham *Reason, Will and Sensation*, 191–206. It must be noted that Beyssade is here limiting the discussion to human freedom and indifference. As we'll see, God is C-indifferent without being ignorant or lacking sufficient knowledge.
14. See Campbell 'Descartes on spontaneity', 184.
15. See AT, vol. 7, 61; CSM, vol. 2, 42; AT, vol. 8A, 19; CSM, vol. 1, 205.
16. An objection: in (5) Descartes states that a type of indifference belongs to human freedom and a type belongs to divine freedom. But you hold that indifference (C-indifference) is essential to divine freedom, but indifference (S-indifference and C-indifference) is not essential to human freedom. This seems *ad hoc* given that Descartes uses the same term '*convenire*' to denote the relation between divine freedom and its type of indifference and between human freedom and its type of indifference. Reply: that indifference belongs essentially to divine freedom but not human freedom follows trivially from the fact that Descartes thinks that *anything* that belongs to God belongs essentially to God. This, however, is not the case with humans. So, although he uses the same term to denote the relation, this does not indicate that 'to belong to' must either denote a relation that holds essentially or one that holds contingently, but not a relation that can hold essentially in some cases and contingently in others. In fact, we should expect that this relation holds essentially in some case and contingently in others. For instance, *being 5' 10"* belongs to me contingently, whereas *being powerful* belongs to God essentially. No problem here.
17. This does not entail that they are *equivocal*. It may perhaps be open to Descartes to take a moderate path similar to Aquinas's *analogical predication*. See *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, 13 and *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I, 34.
18. Cf. AT, vol. 8A, 14; CSM, vol. 1, 201: 'And even [God's] understanding and willing does not happen, as in our case, by mean of operations that are in a certain sense distinct from one another.'
19. This may not be obvious until we examine the conditions under which an agent would be C-indifferent. (4) is a difficult sentence to interpret, especially in light of (5). Prima facie, Descartes appears hold that the indifference discussed in (4) is the same as the 'indifference which belongs to human freedom' in (5). I believe, however, that the indifference in (4) is C-indifference and that in (5) Descartes is saying that *because* of (4), which discusses an indifference which is a deficiency or privation (C-indifference, as will become clear), the indifference that belongs to human freedom is not of *this* kind.
20. Chappell supports this reading; Chappell 'Descartes's compatibilism', 189.
21. See Lex Newman 'The fourth Meditation', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 59 (1999), 559–591.
22. See AT, vol. 7, 55; CSM, vol. 2, 38: 'For error is not a pure negation [in French text: 'i.e. not simply the defect or lack of some perfection to which I have no proper claim'] (AT, vol. 9, 43–44; CSM, vol. 2, 38 n. 1), but rather a privation or lack of some knowledge which somehow *should* be in me' (emphasis mine).
23. See Aquinas *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III, 6: 'Thus, if a man has no wings, that is not an evil for him, because he was born to have them; even if a man does not have blond hair, that is not an evil, for, though he may have such hair, it is not something that is necessarily due him. But it is an evil if he has no hands, for these he is born to and should have – if he is to be perfect. Yet this defect is not an evil for a bird. Every privation, if taken properly and strictly, is of that which one is born to have, and should have.'
24. Dan Kaufman 'Descartes on the objective reality of materially false ideas', *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 81 (2000), 385–408.
25. See AT, vol. 8A, 18, 21; CSM, vol. 1, 204, 207.
26. This is evidence that Descartes does not think that divine and human predicates are equivocal, but simply non-univocal.
27. See AT, vol. 7, 60; CSM, vol. 2, 41–42.

28. See AT, vol. 7, 55–62; CSM, vol. 2, 38–43.
29. In every text in which Descartes characterizes divine freedom, he does so in terms of a lack of all impelling or determination of God's will by something independent of God. See, for instance, AT, vol. 7, 431–432; CSM, vol. 2, 291; AT, vol. 1, 152; CSMK, 25; AT, vol. 4, 118; CSMK, 235.
30. An objection: how can you say this? Earlier, you said that Descartes held that nothing could be said univocally of God and creatures. Now you say that God's freedom requires *something like* S-indifference. But S-indifference is sometimes present in free human actions. How can this be? Reply: I think that that way to address this issue is to point out the following. Although God requires something very much like the positive power of S-indifference, this does not entail that divine S-indifference is the same kind of thing as human S-indifference. One salient difference, as we'll see shortly, is that divine S-indifference requires C-indifference. Human S-indifference does not require C-indifference.
31. Although the last line of this text refers to goodness, the context makes it clear that the same holds for truth.
32. Descartes discusses God's truthfulness in many texts, but God's goodness does not receive nearly as much attention. Despite this fact, it is clear that Descartes held that God is good. See, AT, vol. 4, 293; CSMK, 266, for instance.
33. I wish to thank Vere Chappell, Eileen O'Neill, Susan Peppers, and Robert Sleigh for helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper. This paper was presented at the 2000 Southeastern Seminar in Early Modern Philosophy at Wake Forest University, Texas Tech University, and the University of Florida. Thanks to those audiences for helpful discussion, especially Tad Schmaltz (who will certainly disagree with my take on Descartes' account of human freedom), John Biro, Kirk Ludwig, Aaron Meskin, Rob Rupert, and Mark O. Webb. I also wish to thank Scott Ragland for discussions on this topic and for making some of his excellent work on Descartes' theory of freedom available to me. Unfortunately, I have been unable to address Ragland's work in the present paper.