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CARTESIAN CERTAINTY AND THE INFINITY OF THE WILL

Joseph K. Cosgrove

I am certainly very pleased with my freedom . . .

—Descartes, *Fifth Replies*[1]

Descartes's *Meditations,* read in light of the expressed aim of Cartesian philosophy—foundations for a mathematical science of nature—leaves the contemporary reader with a sense of unease. The metaphysical apparatus seems in some way disproportional to the end product. The determining concepts of Cartesian physics are present, after all, as early as the unpublished *Regulae* and the suppressed *Le Monde,* from which the metaphysical apparatus is absent. As for the *Meditations,* it is difficult to see in the procedure of hyperbolical doubt, for instance, anything crucial to the scientific enterprise as such. Indeed, the doubting procedure itself seems to presuppose Descartes's dualistic conception of mind and body and its corollary, the cognitive defectiveness of the senses. Moreover, if it is true to say that modern science is in some way essentially "Cartesian," why in its subsequent historical development has it based itself, as it were, on the "bracketing" of metaphysics?

If a degree of consensus has emerged on the matter, it is that Cartesian metaphysics represents less a concern with epistemological foundationalism per se than with specific cognitive requirements of the new mathematical physics.[2] Here the scientific and metaphysical programs of the *Meditations* evidently intersect. With the "thinking substance" *(res cogitans) of Meditations* II, for instance, "matter" has in essence already been stripped of the substantial forms and final causes that impede the new science, and mind has been freed from the passivity that renders it susceptible to sense deception. A double movement is in fact discernable in Descartes's metaphysics, a foundational pathway in the *ordo cognoscendi* intersecting multiply with the ontology of thinking and extended substance in the *ordo essendi.* Thus the *cogito* at once

serves as a link in the chain of reasons eventuating in the certification of clear and distinct ideas, and yields as its ontological remainder a desideratum of mathematical physics, the concept of extension. This almost seamless integration of the epistemological program with the mathematico-mechanistic enterprise in physics is perhaps the most impressive achievement of the *Meditations.*

Despite its merits, however, the "scientific" reading of Cartesian metaphysics does not really resolve the apparent disproportion remarked above. Clearly, the Descartes of the *Meditations* is engaged in some form of epistemological foundationalism, and however congenial the foundations secured ultimately prove to a particular scientific epistemology or mathematico-mechanistic conception of nature, neither would seem to require them. To put it simply, Descartes is seeking absolute *certainty* in some sense, but mathematical physics does not seem to require absolute certainty. Indeed, as has so often been pointed out, Descartes himself does not seem to demand certainty when it comes to the actual practice of physics. Why, then, does he nonetheless put forth certainty as the aim of the *Meditations?*

One plausible, but ultimately unsatisfying, response is that the certification of the human intellect as a *reliable* instrument of probabilistic cognition in science requires certainty in the metaphysical foundations of science. If God is free to achieve a particular effect in nature via any number of physical mechanisms, then such effects will admit of multiple explanation and will have to be approached hypothetico-deductively/ probabilistically. The metaphysical principles which ground this very hypothetico-deductive framework, however, must be held to a higher standard. We require indubitability of first principles not because of any inherent unwillingness to tolerate even the slightest possibility of their being wrong, but because at this level any such possibility immediately translates into a fatal compromise of the cognitive faculties in their scientific employment.[3] But from our vantage point it is simply not true that probabilistic cognition requires indubitable foundations. And from Descartes's own vantage point, why celebrate the new science if it yields mere probability when it comes to what most matters in the end, namely, scientific insight into the particular effects of nature, manipulation of which constitutes the fruit of the "tree of philosophy"?

While it has sometimes been maintained that concessions to probability and "moral certainty," especially in later writings such as the *Principles,* constitute an implicit admission of failure regarding the scientific enterprise originally outlined in the *Regulae,* Descartes himself treats with impatience any suggestion that his scientific project is compromised on the matter of certainty. The aim of the foundational-

ism of the *Meditations* is therefore a question deserving of additional consideration. To that end, we shall explore the Cartesian concept of certainty in terms of the dynamics of power between God, human beings, and nature. We shall see that although the essential aim of Cartesian philosophy is indeed certainty rather than mathematical physics per se, certainty in the originary Cartesian sense represents less a quest for the elimination of the possibility for error than a fundamental *posture of control* toward reality, of which Descartes's scientific enterprise ("mastery of nature") constitutes a particular expression. The key to Cartesian certainty, that is to say, is the infinitude, and finally the incoherence, of the Cartesian will.

CERTAINTY AND PROBABILITY

In the first Meditation, having introduced the omnipotent God as potential deceiver, Descartes observes that at least some of his habitual opinions (for example, that he has hands or that two plus three equals five) nevertheless remain "highly probable" *("valde probabiles")* and are "still much more reasonable to believe than to deny" (CSM I: 15; AT VII: 15). While Descartes's meaning is in one sense clear enough—he is doubting hyperbolically in the service of science—what kind of judgment regarding "probability" is possible at this point in the "order of reasons"? The remark precedes the introduction of the *cogito;* hence, from a scientific point of view, *all* of Descartes's longstanding opinions are entirely without foundation. It therefore makes little sense to say they are "probable" if by probable is meant "likely to be true." The seemingly innocuous remark about probability in fact signals an ambiguity in the original position of the Cartesian meditator. Probability would presumably be sufficient for a person of naïve "common sense," whereas the meditator, dissatisfied with probability, has already taken an initial step into scientific consciousness. Thus, while according to the narrative urged upon us by Descartes the author, the decisive move is the *cogito*, where the meditator first attains a scientific foothold, in a truer sense the decisive move has been made already before the narrative starts, "some years ago" when "I was struck by the large number of falsehoods that I had accepted" in childhood and "realized that it was necessary ... to demolish everything" (CSM I: 12; AT VII: 17).

Why is the meditator dissatisfied with probability? Descartes's example of a basket from which one dumps all the apples and examines them one by one, removing any rotten ones to ensure that the rot does not spread *(Seventh Replies;* CSM II: 324; AT VII: 481) suggests that some of his longstanding beliefs will prove true and be reinstated in their original form. But this turns out not to be the case. The most probable of these beliefs, that his body exists, for instance, or that two plus three

equals five, will be reinstated only upon new foundations. Moreover, some probable opinions, such as beliefs about sense qualities, will prove inherently corrupt. Thus from a scientific perspective, all the apples in the basket are rotten. The term "probability" is evidently functioning here essentially as a simple designation for pre-scientific cognition. It is "probable" not in the sense that it is likely to be true, but rather in the sense that there must be something to it, so to speak, since it works. Such cognition originates in what Descartes elsewhere calls the "teaching of nature," described in detail in the sixth Meditation.[4] The sensation of pain, for instance, helps keep my foot out of the fire, even though it misleads me into believing that the "hotness" I feel is in the fire itself. Similarly, although an apple's taste is something within me, the erroneous notion that sweetness is actually in the apple impels me to eat. Such ideas, confused though they may be from a scientific perspective, have survival value, so "I should not doubt that there is some truth" in them (CSM II: 56; AT VII: 80). And, when the term *"probabilis"* recurs in the fourth Meditation, it once again designates a kind of plausible cognition that falls short of science: "For although probable conjectures may pull me in one direction, the mere knowledge that they are simply conjectures, and not certain and indubitable reasons, is itself quite enough to push my assent the other way" (CSM II: 41; AT VII: 59). These probable conjectures (the existence of the meditator's body, for instance), it would seem, fail in toto *of truth,* even if there is little or no chance that they are mistaken.

By contrast, two instances of the term *"probabilis"* in the *Meditations* can arguably be taken in a methodical or scientific sense. The first is in *Meditations* I, where Descartes observes that the less powerful is the author of his being, the "more likely *[probabilius]* it is that I am so imperfect as to be deceived all the time" (CSM I: 14; AT VII: 21). This would seem to be a more or less methodically considered *probabilitas,* resting as it does upon clear and distinct notions of causality and perfection. The second instance is in the discussion leading up to the proof of the existence of the meditator's body in *Meditations* VI. Based on the experience of imagination, which "seems to be nothing else but the application of the cognitive faculty to a body which is intimately present to it, and which therefore exists" (CSM I: 50; AT VII: 71-72), the meditator "can make a probable conjecture *(probabiliter inde conjicio)* that the body exists. But this is only a probability," not a "necessary inference" (CSM I: 51; AT VII: 73). Again, this would appear to be a more or less rigorous use of *"probabilis"* Although the argument will be clinched only by appeal to the veracity of God, the conjecture from imagination is not based on a "mere" probability stemming from common sense habit or prejudice.

Thus we appear to be faced with a double connotation to the term "probability"—non-methodical cognition on the one hand versus approximation to truth on the other. Cotgrave's *Dictionarie* of 1611 lists under *probable/probabilité* both "likelihood" of truth and "appearance" of truth.[5] Our contemporary sense of "probability," colored by the mathematical calculus of probability, tends to eclipse the latter connotation of the term at work in the *Meditations* and elsewhere. *Discourse on Method* Three, for instance, speaks of the practical necessity to sometimes adopt not the "truest opinions" *("les plus vrai opinions"),* but rather the "most probable" *("les plus probables")* (AT VI: 25). Indeed, Descartes employs the terms *"probable"* and *"vraisemblable"* synonymously in a letter to Mersenne of 5 October 1637: *"Car je repute presque pour faux tout ce qui n'est vraisemblable; et quand je dis qu'une chose est aisée à croire je ne veux pas dire qu'elle est probable seulement, mais qu'elle est si claire et si evidente, qu'il n'est pas besoin que je m'arreste à la demonstrer."*[6] While *"vraisemblance"* is typically translated either "plausible" or "probable," its connotation here is clearly pejorative, giving it the sense of "mere appearance" of truth. Similarly, in Rule Two of the *Regulae* the term *"probabilis"* can indicate something positively *unreliable,* namely, the "probable syllogisms" *(probabilium syllogismorum)* of scholastic science (CSM I: 11; AT X: 363). It is not as if Descartes thinks that scholastic science is more likely than not true.

If we consider Descartes's employment of *"certum"* in counterpoint to *"probabilis"* we are perhaps justified in discerning a similarly double connotation. Indeed, the term *"certum"* and its derivatives seem often to function in both senses simultaneously—"certainty" in the usual sense of indubitability, the limit of probability, and "certainty" as methodical, scientific cognition, incommensurate with any form of "mere probability."[7] The distinction between methodical and non-methodical cognition thus cuts across the distinction between "certainty" and "probability" in the usual sense. In the ruling sense, Cartesian certainty and probability represent not points on a single continuum of likelihood, but rather an absolute disjunction between methodical and non-methodical cognition. Descartes does not allow any *degree* of truth to "mere probability," nor any possibility that it could be "improved into" certain knowledge by the accrual of evidence.[8] He rather proposes something more akin to Plato's distinction between ε π ι σ τ η μ η and δ ο ξ a —two distinguishable cognitive faculties and their respective objects. We are therefore faced with a kind of "redoubled" schema of Cartesian probability and certainty. Pre-scientific cognition, itself determined by a continuum of probability and certainty in the usual sense is, from the point of view of scientific cognition, "mere probability" in toto; even its certainties, such as that one has hands or that the external world exists, or even that 2

+ 2 = 4, are merely probable. On the other hand, the entire continuum of scientific cognition, its mere probabilities (such as, for example, that water is made of eel-shaped particles[9]) no less than its certainties in the usual sense (that 2 + 2 = 4, for instance) is "certain" in the essential methodological sense that rules Cartesian philosophy. It is therefore less than illuminating to cast Cartesian method as a means to "certainty" in the usual sense. Method in a sense *is* certainty, for what matters fundamentally to Cartesian philosophy is not so much "indubitable" cognition as control or *ownership* of one's cognitions.

CERTAINTY AND WILL

In *Meditations* I, Descartes entertains the possibility that he might be misled even in his beliefs about mathematics and "other subjects of this kind, which deal only with the simplest and most general things, regardless of whether they really exist in nature or not," that, for instance, he might "go wrong every time I add two and three or count the sides of a square" (CSM II: 14; AT VII: 21). The *ratio dubitande* in this mathematical context is the susceptibility of human beings to error in cases where "they think they have the most perfect knowledge." Such a susceptibility might be attributable to a supremely powerful, but less than veracious, God. Since the passage places God on a level with "fate or chance or a continuous chain of events," the issue is not divine men-daciousness per se, but rather forces beyond Descartes's control which might compromise his cognitive faculties.[10] In the final paragraph of the first Meditation these forces are personified as an Evil Genius with supreme powers of deception *("summe potentem & callidum")* (CSM II: 15; AT VII: 22). Yet such powers are strictly limited, being unable to compel Descartes's assent to anything false: "Even if it is not in my power to know any truth, I shall at least do what is in my power, that is, resolutely guard against assenting to any falsehoods, so that the deceiver, however powerful and cunning he may be, will be unable to impose on me in the slightest degree." Let us designate this resolution to withhold assent the "first moment" of Cartesian certainty, namely, the power to summon into presence at will the absence of evidence.[11] It is the original certainty because it places the meditator in control of his state of uncertainty. He can affirm one truth unconditionally: "I am not being deceived" ("So what remains true? Perhaps just the one fact that nothing is certain"; CSM II: 16; AT VII: 24).

In *Meditations* III, Descartes revisits the *Deus deceptor*. The *ratio dubitande* cited is, once again, that "God could have given me a nature such that I am deceived even in matters that seemed most evident" (CSM II: 25; AT VII: 36). Yet this time he adds that "when I turn to the things themselves which I think I perceive very clearly, I am so convinced by

them that I spontaneously declare: let whoever can do so deceive me, he will never bring it about that. . . two and three added together are more or less than five, or anything of this kind in which I see a manifest contradiction." The *cogito* of *Meditations* II has evidently intervened on behalf of mathematical knowledge. Clear and distinct ideas, at the time they are being perceived, are immune to the *Deus deceptor*. Thus Descartes's response in *Second Replies* to the charge of circularity in his proof for the existence of God: "When I said we can know nothing for certain until we are aware that God exists [and is not a deceiver], I expressly declared that I was speaking only of knowledge of those conclusions which can be recalled when we are no longer attending to the arguments by means of which we deduced them" (CSM II: 100; AT VII: 140).[12] As long as he attends to the proof, Descartes remarks in *Meditations* V, he "cannot but believe" that the three angles of a triangle add up to two right angles." However,

> as soon as I turn my mind's eye away from the proof, then in spite of still remembering that I perceived it very clearly, I can easily fall into doubt about its truth, if I am unaware of God. For I can convince myself that I have a natural disposition to go wrong from time to time in matters which I think I perceive as evidently as can be. (CSM II: 48; AT VII: 69-70)

Why would a possible "disposition to go wrong" compromise a remembered proof but not an immediate intellectual intuition? Because the evidence for the proof is not now present for affirmation by the will, and is for that reason outside the meditator's control. However, it can be summoned before the intellect at any time by an act of will. Thereby is secured the second moment of Cartesian certainty, the power to summon evidence into presence at will. The uniqueness of the *cogito*, which qua clear and distinct idea is not privileged over other clear and distinct ideas, lies in its producing its own evidence whenever it is thought. The first moment of certainty could not produce its own evidence—external forces (sense impressions, for instance, or a *Deus deceptor)* controlled the absence of evidence. In the second moment of certainty, the thinking ego enjoys not just the power of attention, but the ability to produce out of itself the very evidence to which it must attend (mathematicals, for instance, or the concept of extension). Thus in its second moment, certainty accrues to Descartes's ideas just so far as he himself is, to employ Spinoza's locution, their "adequate cause."[13]

While Descartes's focus on the problem of *dubitability* (e.g., "As soon as we think that we correctly perceive something, we are spontaneously convinced" [CSM II: 103; AT VII, 103]; "I spontaneously declare . . ." [CSM II: 25; AT VII: 36]; "So long as I perceive something very clearly and distinctly I cannot but believe . . ." [CSM II: 48; AT VII: 69]) might

easily mislead us into thinking that we are here dealing with a psychological or subjective state, the very inability to doubt is consequent upon an act of will, namely, the focus of attention ("when I turn to the things themselves"). Indubitability is therefore posterior to freedom of the will.[14] Moreover, Descartes's very emphasis on the "subject" signals that "objectivity" is being defined in terms of will. Any other sense of truth is without interest:

> What is it to us that someone may make out the perception whose truth we are so firmly convinced of may appear false to God or an angel, so that it is, absolutely speaking, false? Why should this alleged "absolute falsity" bother us, since we neither believe in it nor have even the smallest suspicion of it? For the supposition which we are making here is of a conviction so firm that it is quite incapable of being destroyed; and such a conviction is clearly the same as the most perfect certainty. *(Second Replies;* CSM II: 103; AT VII: 145)

Certainty, therefore, is not the mere inability to doubt, which could always be a deception, but the ability to *make* oneself unable to doubt via the will to attention. In the final analysis, then, the much-debated question of whether prior to the proof for the existence of the veracious God in *Meditations* III, clear and distinct ideas are "objectively certain" or only psychologically or "subjectively certain" misses the point. Cartesian certainty precedes any distinction between "subjectivity" and "objectivity"; it itself sets up the domain of objectivity.

A third moment of Cartesian certainty is necessitated by an inherent limitation of human nature, the intellect's inability to attend to all evidence at once in a single "mental vision" *(Meditations* V; CSM II: 48; AT VII: 69-70). God, the evidence for which can be summoned at will into presence all at once, therefore serves as a surrogate for the evidence of systematic scientific knowledge, which cannot. The human intellect, we are now assured, does "tend towards truth, at least when we use it correctly" *(Second Replies;* CSM II: 103; AT VII: 144). The will secures its total domain by summoning the evidence for God into presence, thereby redeeming the finitude of the human intellect, its inability to be simultaneously present to all truths. Only this posture of the will accounts for the seeming contradiction between Descartes's appeal to the veracity of God on the one hand and his dismissal of the same on the other ("What is it to us that someone may make out the perception whose truth we are so firmly convinced of may appear false to God or an angel . . . ?"; CSM II: 103; AT VII: 144-145). Once the will has secured its preeminent status as arbiter of all truth, such "metaphysical falsity" poses no threat; for the assent of the will can no longer be shaken by inattentiveness and the failure of presence consequent upon it. This must explain why Descartes fails to address the seemingly obvious

question of whether an intellect for which continuous attention posed no difficulty (an angel?) would nonetheless be dependent upon divine certification of its ideas.

We thus encounter three successive moments of certainty in the *Meditations:* (1) the ego's strength of will to attend to the absence of evidence, and thus refuse assent, regardless of any external influence; (2) the ego's strength of will to summon evidence into presence by producing out of itself that very evidence, and thus persist in assent; (3) divine certification of evidence that cannot be summoned into presence all at once.[15] As acts of attention, moments (1) and (2) are on a level. Moment (3) seems clearly posterior to (2), which latter, although dependent on (3) from the perspective of the temporarily inattentive intellect, supports (3) while remaining independent of it in the order of reasons. Descartes has thus systematically subordinated God to the human will and its incontestable power of summoning evidence (or the absence thereof) into presence. If there were any doubt in the *Meditations* itself stemming from the ambiguity of the *Deus deceptor/*Evil Genius *("aliquem Deum"* ["some God"; AT VII: 21], "*genium aliquem malignum*" ["some Evil Genius"; AT VII: 22]),[16] it is dispelled in *Principles* I, #6, where Descartes affirms as clearly as one could want the primacy of the human will: "But whoever turns out to have created us, and however powerful and however deceitful he may be, in the meantime we nonetheless experience within us the kind of freedom which enables us always to refrain from believing things which are not completely certain and thoroughly examined. Hence we are able to take precautions against going wrong on any occasion" (CSM I: 194; AT VIIIA: 6).[17] God could not overrule the resolute will even if, *per impossibile,* deceit were compatible with omnipotence. While Richard Kennington famously argued that since the omnipotent God must inevitably put a stop to Cartesian inquiry, he must be abandoned in favor of a finite "Evil Genius," one should like to say rather that the omnipotent God is not abandoned, but simply put in his place.

WILL AND ATTENTION

It has long been observed by students of the *Meditations* that Descartes interprets truth in terms of certainty.[18] In light of our analysis we should add that Descartes interprets certainty itself in terms of control, thus effectively defining truth as that which falls within the purview of the will. Having assigned to the omnipotent God his subsidiary if indispensable role, it would seem, the Cartesian will can proceed to assert its absolute preeminence across the range of human cognition. Yet Jean-Luc Marion, in his challenging analysis of Cartesian metaphysics, maintains that Descartes sets forth a "redoubled onto-theo-logy," in

which the *cogitatio* first submits all being *(ens ut cogitatum),* including God, to the conditions of its own rationality, only to be itself surpassed by God as *causa:*

> It is thus a case of a doubling that strengthens, and not of an incoherent or conflictual division: the entire first constitution, in addition to having its own proper articulation, is subsumed within the second constitution and plays the role of region of being in general. The onto-theo-logical constitution imposed by the *dictat* of reason thinks as *ens causatum* (thus according to an ontology) the totality of the onto-theo-logical constitution deployed in the first pronouncement about beings *(cogitare),* thus the *ens ut cogitatio sui (ego,* theology) as well as the *ens ut cogitatum* (ontology). Descartes doubles and strengthens onto-theo-logy by reinterpreting the first acceptation of *esse—esse: cogitare*—by means of a second, *esse: causare.*[19]

From the perspective of Marion's analysis, it would appear that our entire account of Cartesian certainty as control would fall under the first figure of Cartesian metaphysics *("ens ut cogitatum"* and *"ens ut cogitatio sui"),* with the human will subsequently surpassed by the divine will in the redoubled onto-theology *("ens ut causatum").* We would therefore need to weaken our thesis regarding *control* as the ruling sense of Cartesian certainty, for Cartesian certainty would in this case be underwritten by a divine will that unambiguously surpasses the human will in the *ordo essendi.*

To make Marion's case as forcefully as possible, God as infinite is capable of that which to us appears contradictory, namely, sovereignty over the human will, which latter "we experience within ourselves" as being absolutely free. According to Marion, the Cartesian will is "extra-metaphysical," its freedom predicated upon a release, through inattention, from the metaphysics of presence (that is to say, constant presence of evidence).[20] Similarly, God understood under the attribute of infinity is incomprehensible and as such also beyond metaphysics.[21] Since solely as regards liberty, but not causal power, is the human will itself infinite (and thus equal to the divine will), we cannot similarly affirm that the human will, in some way we cannot grasp, supercedes the divine will. Thus, our ability to "prevent ourselves from ever being deceived" must be understood as compatible with but nonetheless ultimately subordinate to God's power over the human will in the *ordo essendi.* Certainty as control itself suffers a redoubling—a controlled control.

The resolution of this issue, to the extent that it can be resolved at all, must hinge on whether the "resolute will" that vanquishes the *Deus deceptor* in *Meditations* I and *Principles* I, #6 can be subsumed under the "official" Cartesian doctrine of will set forth in *Meditations*

IV. Specifically, given that human freedom is not clearly and distinctly understood, but rather experienced within ("I am certainly very pleased with my freedom since I experience it within myself," Descartes retorts to Gassendi in *Fifth Replies;* CSM II: 259; AT VII: 377), what is the most coherent account of which the Cartesian will admits, and does that account point to the human will's ultimate subordination to the divine will? And given that the official account of the human will in *Meditations* IV is embedded in a theodicy, is it truly the divine will that is vindicated by that theodicy, or is it rather the human will?

Human freedom of will, Descartes famously asserts in *Meditations* IV, is such as to constitute a form of equality with God:

> For although God's will is incomparably greater than mine, both in virtue of the knowledge and power that accompany it and make it more firm and efficacious, and also in virtue of its object, in that it ranges over a greater number of items, nevertheless it does not seem any greater than mine when considered as will in the essential and strict sense. This is because the will simply consists in our ability to do or not do something (that is, to affirm or deny, to pursue or avoid); or rather, it consists simply in the fact that when the intellect puts something forward for affirmation or denial or for pursuit or avoidance, our inclinations are such that we do not feel we are determined by any external force. (CSM II: 40; AT VII: 57)

Of course, the fact that we do not "feel" such a force does not mean it is not there. Unlike the divine intellect, which differs only formally from the divine will, a created intellect cannot be purely active. Rather, will and intellect at the creaturely level differ as "the activity and passivity of one and the same substance. For strictly speaking, understanding is the passivity of the mind and willing its activity" (Descartes to Regius, May 1641; CSM III: 182; AT III: 372). Therefore, while in one sense certainty accrues to Descartes's ideas just so far as he himself is their "adequate cause," at the same time there is a certain bow to necessity, since the intellect does not create the truths it sets before the will for affirmation. But God's intellect is pure activity.[22] God is therefore the adequate cause of his own cognitions in an unqualified sense. All truth must be posterior to the dictates of the divine will, for otherwise divine cognition would be in a dependent relation to something external. Thus the doctrine of divine creation of eternal truths: "The mathematical truths which you call eternal have been laid down by God and depend on him entirely no less than the rest of his creatures. Indeed to say that these truths are independent of God is to talk of him as if he were Jupiter or Saturn and to subject him to the Styx and the Fates" (Descartes to Mersenne, 15 April 1630; CSM III: 23; AT I: 145).[23] In the strict sense, then, a thing is

understood through its cause only in the "supreme indifference" *(Sixth Replies;* CSM II: 292; AT VII: 432) of the creator.

The analogy between the divine will and the human will must therefore in some way break down, since human freedom is defined not in terms of indifference, but rather irresistible inclination of the will via clear and distinct ideas *(Medit.* IV; CSM II: 41; AT VII: 58-59). Thus the primacy of the divine freedom would seem to be reestablished. Yet the human will's very "lack of indifference" is itself a function of willed attention. Indeed, since it contests the omnipotent deceiver, it must be determined by the highest form of attentiveness, one that overcomes "a kind of laziness [that] brings me back to normal life" (CSM II: 15; AT VII: 23). That decision for attentiveness must be determined by perception (via the intellect) of a "clearly known good," namely, the attainment of scientific cognition. Thus a previous decision will have to have been made for attentiveness to that good; judgment will be determined by attention, and attention will be determined by a judgment regarding the goodness of paying attention. To escape the infinite regress, the will must fall away from presence into inattention, in which case it lapses into some degree of indifference, the "lowest grade of freedom."[24] This would not be overly objectionable, perhaps, were Descartes offering an account of the qualified and limited freedom of finite human beings. In the event, however, it compromises the absolute autonomy of the will, upon which the theodicy of *Meditations* IV depends and ultimately Cartesian certainty itself. The resolute will of *Meditations* I in fact falls under no coherent interpretation of Cartesian freedom. It is fitting, therefore, that Cartesian freedom be something we "feel" within ourselves as opposed to something clearly and distinctly perceived. Cartesian freedom, as Marion observes, is situated beyond the horizon of Cartesian metaphysics. We can only add that it is this very situation that renders Cartesian metaphysics possible.

If the Cartesian doctrine of will finally admits of no coherent interpretation, we are left simply with the very self-assertion of the will, certified by our inner sense of a freedom that no omnipotent will or other external power could overrule. Indeed, the very incoherence of the Cartesian will only buttresses its primacy. A clear and distinct account of the will would situate it within Marion's first figure of metaphysics *(ens ut cogitatum),* only to be surpassed by the redoubled onto-theology of *ens ut causatum,* whether the ultimate *causa* were God or natural forces ("a continuous chain of effects") beyond our control. A coherent account of the human will, albeit as infinite and thus ultimately beyond human comprehension, would situate the human will beyond metaphysics, but the latter would nonetheless still be subordinate to an absolute divine infinitude that surpassed the qualified infinitude of the human

will. Such a divine will might, for reasons we cannot comprehend, elect to endow us with a cognitive faculty that misleads us into believing that omnipotence is incompatible with deception, for instance; or more realistically, natural forces might produce in us an "experience within" that deceives us regarding our possession of free will. Descartes's response to this possibility we have already remarked in *Second Replies:* "What is it to us that someone may make out that the perception whose truth we are so firmly convinced of may appear false to God or an angel. . . ?" But if such a "firm conviction" represents more than a merely psychological criterion of truth, it is because it is a product of the will itself which, through its willing, establishes the very domain of objectivity. Only the "feeling" of unrestrained liberty frees the Cartesian will from subjection to divine or natural powers altogether. It simply *asserts itself* as superior to any such powers.

Zbigniew Janowski remarks on the analogy, first pointed out by Gouhier, between Augustinian original sin and Cartesian childhood.[25] The difference, of course, is the efficacy of the Cartesian will in the face of this original condition. Via the notion of original sin, Augustine vindicates the goodness of God, since original sin does not proceed from God, although for reasons incomprehensible to us (but accountable in an "aesthetic theodicy" serving as a template for Descartes's own), God has allowed it. Descartes's theodicy, by contrast, ultimately vindicates the human will. The limitations of childhood do proceed from God, but the human will is able rectify them on its own. The vindication of God in the theodicy of *Meditations* IV serves to certify the Cartesian metaphysics of presence, itself a function of the human will. Descartes's repeated affirmations that his intellect will lead him to truth, "at least when I use it correctly," discount the possibility that without divine grace he might lack the very power to use it correctly. It is thus an irony, in light of his "Pelagian" doctrine of will, that Descartes aligned himself with the Augustinians in their controversy with the Molinist Jesuits.[26]

CONCLUSION

Certainty as posture of control provides a unified context for viewing Cartesian metaphysics and Cartesian physical science in their complex interrelationship. Cartesian certainty transcends, even while grounding, mathematical physics. For this reason Cartesian certainty can serve as the point of departure for a modern metaphysical tradition through Leibniz, Kant, Hegel, and Husserl that is no less determined by control of the cognitive encounter with the world than is modern physical science.[27] Certainty plays out in physical science as a kind of ontological prescription casting nature in terms of formal mathematical properties. Sense qualities, being passively perceived, are denied any ontological

status beyond that of indicating the proximity of an object;[28] if they belonged to bodies themselves, science would be utterly dependent on a passive form of cognition. The aspiration to "adequate causality" of one's cognitions explains Descartes's impatience with the suggestion that the admission of mere hypotheses or "moral certainty" in science signals a flaw in his method. He is in control of the uncertainty of these hypotheses. As a mathematical account of phenomena in terms of extension and figure, for instance, the theory of eel-shaped water particles in *Le Monde* rests on evidence produced out of the rational ego itself, and thus falls on this side of the divide between certainty and "mere probability."[29] The theory's uncertainty is sheltered by the first moment of Cartesian certainty, the presence, via will to attention, of the absence of evidence. Descartes knows that the water particles are too small too be directly observed, and that there are no experiments currently available to him that would settle the question definitively. Unlike the pre-scientific observer of nature, he may be wrong, but he is not deceived.

Mathematical physics remains an inherently limited form of Cartesian certainty, however, for its access to the physical world is inescapably mediated by the senses. Thus, although the modern scientific and technological enterprise has succeeded in many respects far beyond what Descartes could have anticipated when he envisioned a practical philosophy which might make us "lords and masters of nature" *(Discourse* VI; CSM I: 142-143; AT VI: 62), he himself seems to have grown less and less confident about its prospects, increasingly turning his attention toward moral concerns. Regarding the latter he writes, "Indeed I have found it easier to reach satisfactory conclusions on this topic than on many others concerning medicine, on which I have spent much more time. So instead of finding ways to preserve life, I have found another, much easier and surer way, which is not to fear death" (Descartes to Chanut, 15 June 1646; CSM III: 289; AT IV: 441-442). The third maxim of the "provisional" code of morals in *Discourse* Three ("to master myself rather than fortune" (CSM I: 123; AT VI: 25) is therefore to remain in force indefinitely. Elaborating on this "stoic" notion of the moral good, Descartes writes to Christina that

> the supreme good of each individual consists only in a firm will to do well and the contentment this produces. My reason for saying this is that I can discover no other good which seems so great or entirely within each man's power. For the goods of the body and of fortune do not depend absolutely on us; and those of the soul can all be reduced to two heads, the one being to know, and the other to will, what is good. But knowledge is often beyond our powers; and so there remains only our will, which is absolutely within our disposal. (Descartes to

> Christina of Sweden, 20 November 1647; CSM III: 324-325; AT V: 82-83)

The tension between doing the good, which would depend on knowing the good, and doing what we judge to be good, which would not, is thus resolved via the will, which produces the presence of the good via attention (being present) to itself. Descartes does not inquire after the good, and then raise the question of whether or the extent to which it falls under the control of the will. Rather, he demarcates the domain of the will and then *defines it as the good*. The projected *telos* of mathematical physics, our "enjoyment of the fruits of the earth and all the goods we find there," thus gives way to the freedom of willing itself. "Cartesian stoicism," one should like to say, is none other than the ethical form of Cartesian certainty.[30] Indeed, prefiguring and in a way already surpassing the Kantian quest for autonomy via a self-legislating will, Cartesian certainty from the beginning wants a fulfillment beyond anything to be had in mastery of nature via physical science. The latter offers at best a partial autonomy.

If attention defines the Cartesian will, it also points beyond it. For an irresistible inclination of the will absent external compulsion is in some way also a definition of faith.[31] Descartes seems to be in a sense attempting to invest clear and distinct ideas with a certainty traditionally reserved to faith, with the difference that faith as understood in the Christian tradition to which Descartes is indebted is a gift and does not exclude doubt (thus "I believe, help thou mine unbelief," Mark 9:24). The Cartesian emphasis on attention, indeed, calls to mind the twentieth-century religious thinker Simone Weil. For Weil, attention is the very substance of faith, yet it is itself not an exertion of will power, but a form of "waiting":

> Attention is an effort, the greatest of all efforts perhaps, but it is a negative effort. . . . Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object. . . . We do not obtain the most precious gifts by going in search of them but by waiting for them. Man cannot discover them by his own powers, and if he sets out to seek for them he will find in their place counterfeits of which he will be unable to discern the falsity.[32]

Perhaps Descartes's doctrine, by its very incoherence, suggests the possibility of an act of attention beyond the effort of the will, and an evidence beyond the production of the intellect.

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NOTES

1. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (hereafter cited as "CSM"), trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985-91), II: 259; *Oeuvres de Descartes* (hereafter cited as "AT"), ed. C. Adam and P. Tannery (Paris: Cerf, 1887-1913), VII: 377.

2. The body of literature on this question is quite large. Two recent studies reflecting the "scientific" approach to Cartesian metaphysics, very different from one another, are Stephen Menn's *Descartes and Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) and Peter Schouls, *Descartes and the Possibility of Science* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000). Daniel Garber, of course, has written extensively on the matter, especially his *Descartes's Metaphysical Physics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), as has Gary Hatfield (e.g., "Reason, Nature, and God in Descartes," in *Essays in the Philosophy and Science of René Descartes*, ed. Stephen Voss [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993]). Some other important and well-known studies are Desmond Clarke, *Descartes' Philosophy of Science* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1982); Richard Kennington, "The Teaching of Nature in Descartes's Soul Doctrine," *Review of Metaphysics*, vol. 26 (September 1972), pp. 86-117; Hiram Caton, *The Origin of Subjectivity* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1973).

3. See, for instance, Frederick F. Schmitt, "Why Was Descartes a Founda-tionalist?" in *Essays on Descartes' "Meditations*, "ed. Amélie O. Rorty (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 492-512.

4. In a strict sense mathematical opinions do not fall under the "teaching of nature," but at this point in the procedure of methodical doubt they share a similar status.

5. Randle Cotgrave, *A Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues* (London, 1611; New York: Da Capo Press, 1971). The historical evolution of the term is traced in Alain Rey's *Dictionnaire Historique de la Langue Française* (Paris: *Dictionnaires le Robert*, 1992), p. 1636. The French *probable* originally carried the positive connotation of the Latin *probabalis*, "*une chose digne d'approbation*," more specifically something "provable." By the end of the fourteenth-century, however, the term begins to acquire its modern and more ambiguous or at least neutral sense as "opinion" *("une opinion ayant une apparence de vérité').* Our contemporary sense of "probability" as a degree of likelihood that something is true is influenced by the mathematical science of probability still in its infancy as Descartes writes (Pascal's early work on the probability calculus, for instance, dates to 1654). One finds a similarly double connotation to the term "probability" in Leibniz. Criticizing Descartes's law of conservation of quantity of motion, for instance, Leibniz remarks upon "how unsafe it is to affirm anything in mathematics on the basis of probable arguments"; Leibniz, *Dynamics: On Power and the Laws of Corporeal Nature*, in *G. W. Leibniz: Philosophical Essays*, trans. Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989), p. 106. However, elsewhere he refers to a rigorous species of scientific/mathematical

probability, for example, *Preface to a Universal Characteristic*, ibid., p. 9: "For even probabilities are subject to calculation and demonstration, since one can always judge what is more likely [*probabilius*] to happen on the basis of given circumstances."

6. "I consider almost as false whatever is only a matter of probability; and when I say that something is easy to believe I do not mean that it is only probable, but that it is so clear and so evident that there is no need for me to stop to prove it" (CSM III: 74; AT I: 450-51). Anthony Kenny's translation of this passage is potentially misleading, since both *"vraisemblable"* and *"probable"* are rendered "probable."

7. An exception would seem to be the certainty of faith, which is indubitable but not methodical.

8. After working out the ideas presented in this section I came across M. Glouberman's *Descartes: The Probable and the Certain* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1986), which similarly remarks on the incommensurability of "probability" and "certainty" in Descartes. Glouberman's study, which merits greater notice, addresses primarily logical and semantic aspects of the distinction.

9. *Meteorology*, First Discourse.

10. CSM I: 14; AT VII: 21. This point regarding the potentially deceiving God as a *ratio dubitande* is affirmed also by Stephen Menn, *Descartes and Augustine* (238-9), although I differ with Menn on the question of how the doubt is resolved.

11. Peter Schouls has emphasized the role of the will in Cartesian doubt, and while his reading of the first Meditation is generally on target, his notion of "liberty of opportunity" is not especially helpful in interpreting these passages. Schouls argues that the willed refusal of assent in *Meditations* I falls under neither the liberty of "spontaneity," which is a matter of determination of the will by clear and distinct ideas, nor the liberty of "indifference," an inferior grade of freedom stemming from inattentiveness; see Schouls, *Descartes and the Enlightenment* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queens, 1989), chap. IV. While it is true that Descartes's account of freedom of will in terms of spontaneity and indifference *{Meditations TV)* seems to omit the *"Deus deceptor-defying"* will of *Meditations* I, it is clear that the latter, like the liberty of spontaneity, is essentially determined by attention. Descartes resolves to "stubbornly and firmly persist in this meditation," an arduous undertaking because "a kind of laziness brings me back to normal life" (CSM II: 15; AT VII: 23). What is arduous is not refraining from belief, but continually focusing the attention; suspension of belief follows irresistibly upon attentiveness to the absence of evidence. Here one must endorse James Petrik's conclusion against Schouls that "the acts of pursuing something single-mindedly and with determination are as much the result of the will's necessitation by the ideas of consciousness as are any other acts"; James Petrik, *Descartes's Theory of the Will* (Durango, Colorado: Hollowbrook, 1992), p. 105.

12. Compare *Conversation with Burman* (CSM II: 334; AT V: 148): "He [the author of the *Meditations]* does use such axioms in the proof, but he knows that

he is not deceived with regard to them, since he is actually paying attention to them. And as long as he does pay attention to them, he is certain that he is not being deceived, and he is compelled to give his assent to them."

13. The Cartesian notion of self-activity in cognition is taken over by both Spinoza and Leibniz. Proceeding on the scholastic premise that to understand something is to grasp it through its cause *(demonstratio propter quid),* Spinoza argues that our ideas are adequate when we are active in cognition because just in that instance they are "clearly and distinctly understood through our nature alone"; Spinoza, *Ethics and Selected Letters,* trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1982), p. 104. Considered over against sensation, for instance, an idea of the intellect has its origin in the intellect itself, and so is grasped through its cause. In sensation, by contrast, what we are primarily aware of is a bodily affection of which we are merely a partial cause. Sensation can therefore only be a confused form of perception. Cf. Leibniz, *Monadology* 49: "The creature is said to *act* externally insofar as it is perfect, and to *be acted upon* by another, insofar as it is imperfect. Thus we attribute *action* to a monad insofar as it has distinct perceptions, and *passion,* insofar as it has confused perceptions"; *G. W. Leibniz: Philosophical Essays,* p. 219.

14. On this point compare Schouls, *Descartes and the Enlightenment,* pp. 40-48.

15. From this vantage point certainty regarding the existence of particular physical objects appears anomalous. Here God certifies not a clear and distinct idea, but a natural disposition to believe *(Medit.* VI; CSM II: 55; AT VII: 79-80). However, it is not the existence of the physical world that is at issue in Cartesian philosophy of nature, but the priority of mathematical extension over sense qualities.

16. There does not appear to be anything crucial hanging on the distinction between the *Deus deceptor* and the Evil Genius. Descartes clearly introduces the Evil Genius out of concern to avoid the impression that he is impugning the goodness of God. See Descartes to the Curators of Leiden University, 4 May 1647; CSM III: 316-7; AT V: 7-9. What matters is the very indeterminacy of this being, such that he can be provisionally conceived, *per impossible,* as an omnipotent deceiver. On this point see Jean-Luc Marion, *On Descartes's Metaphysical Prism,* trans. Jeffrey L. Koskey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 215-216. For an opposing view, however, see Richard Kennington, "The Finitude of Descartes' Evil Genius," *Journal of the History of Ideas,* vol. 32 (1971), pp. 441-446.

17. This passage ("we are able to take precautions against going wrong on any occasion" ["*possimus abstinere; atque ita cavere, ne umquam erremus*"]*)* is stronger in the French version: *"nous pouvons . . . empêcher d'être jamais trompés"* ("we can prevent ourselves from ever being deceived" [my translation]).

18. For instance, Harry Frankfurt, *Demons, Dreamers, and Madmen* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970), pp. 25-26.

19. Marion, *On Descartes's Metaphysical Prism,* p. 122.

20. Ibid., pp. 193-205.

21. Ibid., pp. 269-276.

22. See, for instance, Descartes to Mesland, 2 May 1644: "But if we would know the immensity of his power," we should not "conceive any precedence or priority between his intellect and will; for the idea which we have of God teaches us that there is in him only a single activity, entirely simple and entirely pure. This is well-expressed by the words of St. Augustine: 'they are so because thou see'est them to be so'; because in God *seeing* and *willing* are one and the same thing" (CSM III: 235; AT IV: 119).

23. In addition to the famous letters to Mersenne of 1630, see also, for instance, *Sixth Replies;* CSM II: 291; AT VII: 432.

24. The "positive faculty" of indifference spoken of by Descartes in his correspondence with Mesland is not simply a matter of inattentiveness as a human imperfection, the inability to maintain presence of evidence. In this form it would not be an expression of genuine freedom. Rather, it is a deliberate turning away from presence, a resolute indifference. But to deliberately turn away from a "clearly perceived truth" or a "clearly known good," it would seem, the will must be inclined by some other clearly perceived truth or clearly perceived good. And Descartes does not hide from us what it is: "provided we consider it a good thing to demonstrate our freedom of will by so doing." The metaphysics of presence thus reasserts itself at the very point of its own transgression.

25. Zbigniew Janowski, *Cartesian Theodicy* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 2000), pp. 137-140. Janowski reaches a similar conclusion to ours regarding the incoherence of the Cartesian will.

26. See Janowski, ibid., pp. 27-48, for an account of the controversy and Descartes's relationship to it.

27. In the process, the *"philosophia naturalis"* of the scholastic tradition is bifurcated into "metaphysics of nature" and "science," a division we are still living with today. In a forthcoming essay I attempt to demonstrate that both Descartes's physics and his metaphysics of nature alike stem from a "negative" ontology of nature which grounds the subsequent bracketing of metaphysics in classical physics.

28. And, in some way that Descartes never adequately explains, also the shape of an object.

29. It is not crucial that the better part of Descartes's physics consists of qualitative explanations rather than the sort of mathematical analysis that we associate with Galileo and Newton. More important is that Descartes, via the concept of extension, casts body ontologically in terms of mathematical properties exclusively. Moreover, see Daniel Garber on Descartes's active participation in the seventeenth-century program for mathematical physics; Garber, "A Different Descartes: Descartes and the Program for a Mathematical Physics in his Correspondence," in *Descartes' Natural Philosophy*, ed. Stephen Gaukroger, John Schuster, and John Sutton (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 113-130.

30. See also Descartes's discussion of *générosité* in *The Passions of the Soul*, part three (especially #153).

31. John Cottingham, among others, has pointed out the parallel between the irresistible assent of the Cartesian intellect and faith; Cottingham, "Descartes and the Voluntariness of Belief," *The Monist*, vol. 85, no. 3 (2002), p. 355. Heidegger links Cartesian certainty to "Christianity and the *certainty of salvation";* Martin Heidegger, *What is a Thing?* trans. W. B. Barton, Jr., and Vera Deutsch (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1967), p. 99.

32. Simone Weil, "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God," in *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), pp. 111-112.