Does a Truly Ultimate God Need to Exist?

Johann Platzer

Abstract: We explore a 'Neo-Cartesian' account of divine ultimacy that raises the concept of God to its ultimate level of abstraction so that we can do away with even the question of his existence. Our starting point is God's relation to the logical and metaphysical order of reality and the views of Descartes and Leibniz on this topic. While Descartes held the seemingly bizarre view that the eternal truths are freely created by God, Leibniz stands for the mainstream view that the eternal truths are grounded in God's nature. We argue that the implausibility of Descartes' doctrine stems mainly from the assumption that there is a non-epistemic notion of absolute necessity (metaphysical necessity) that constitutes the ultimate court of appeal for all modal questions and that this assumption is questionable. We also question the assumption that God's ultimacy merely requires that all reality be grounded in God in the sense of mere explanation, so that it suffices if the necessary truths are grounded in God's nature but not in God's will. This will lead us to a reassessment of Descartes' position. In the final and main part of the paper we push Descartes' doctrine of the creation of the eternal truths to its 'logical' conclusion with the aim to get to a novel conception of 'God.'

The Generalized Euthyphro Dilemma

Most people will presumably agree that the most important question regarding God is whether he exists or not. Only an existent God, it seems, can bestow meaning and value on the world and our lives, and only an existent God can be the efficient cause of natural reality. But existence is always the existence of 'something.' If God is to exist, he must have properties that make him especially God and not any other being; in other words, he must have what we usually call the nature or essence of a thing.[1] Every entity must have (in addition to universal metaphysical features like individuality and self-identity) those essential properties which it cannot lose without ceasing to be that very entity it is. But, if God has essential properties, he

---

[1] Minimal essentialism, the view that apart from universal properties like being self-identical, there are virtually no limits to the ways in which a given entity might have been different from the way it actually is, is very likely not a view a theist would endorse with regard to God.

is bound by them. For any essential property God has, there are things which he cannot do or bring about, namely, whatever would be in contradiction to his having that property. In this regard then, God is on a par with any other item of the ontological inventory. He may well possess to a maximal degree all those great-making properties commonly attributed to him, but in the end he is no less restricted by his divine nature than any other being is by its own given nature.

According to traditional theism God is the uniquely perfect being which instantiates all great-making properties to a maximal degree. This form of theism, also called perfect-being theology, which has ontological excellence as its main criterion for what it is to be God, however, raises a problem: To assess beings with respect to their ontological excellence, it requires a framework of values on the basis of which they can be evaluated and compared with one another. But then, it seems that this framework of values is antecedent to the beings evaluated and thus also antecedent to God (who is evaluated as the most excellent being). Perfect-being theology thus seems to lead to one horn of the famous Euthyphro dilemma, namely the case that God loves what is valuable because it is (per se) valuable (and not that the valuable is valuable because God loves it). Perfect-being-theology rests on the assumption that our intuitions about great-making properties have a God-independent base, that what is valuable or 'great' is *absolutely so* and does not depend, or at least not exclusively so, on God or even contingent conditions like subject, circumstance, time, and so on. Clearly, if what 'great' means were to depend exclusively on God, then the statement that God is the greatest of all beings would be a mere tautology and hence vacuous. A perfect-being theologian must therefore deny that there are any possible worlds in which, for instance, 'being all-powerful' is not a value. She must assume that those axiological truths which are the basis for her notion of the most perfect being are true 'no matter what', i.e., have a status of absolute or metaphysical necessity to them. But then, they would seem to be metaphysically given, true regardless of whether God affirms them or not, and we have exactly the situation as in the Euthyphro dilemma, namely that God loves what is valuable because it is valuable per se. Surely, the perfect-being theologian typically holds that the facts about goodness and value do depend on God, not on his choice but on his nature, and that their status of necessity derives from the necessity of God's nature. But, that does not really solve the dilemma for it seems that the standards of goodness and value would obtain *and be as they are* even if there was no God. We feel this strong intuition which is the very point of the Euthyphro dilemma

that it is not the values which are defined by God or something in God (his nature), but rather that it is the other way round, that it is God or his nature who is defined in terms of those values, for example, when we take it for granted that nothing less than a perfectly good being could qualify as God.

The Euthyphro dilemma concerns not only the axiological but also the logical and metaphysical order of reality. For however eminent God's position within the ontological order may be, he remains subject to the same logical and metaphysical principles which govern everything that can be said to exist. And, again, these logical and metaphysical principles seem logically/metaphysically prior to the entities they govern. Some of these principles, as we will see, constitute ultimate conditions of any entity's identity and existence including the identity and existence of God. Prima facie, this would seem to imply that these principles are more ultimate than God himself, contrary to Paul Tillich's demand that no explanations and grounding relations trace back through God to some more ultimate context (Tillich 1955). As in the case of the axiological truths, it seems that God has no choice but to affirm the logical and metaphysical truths that determine reality at its most fundamental level.

The Laws of Logic

Truths which are (taken to be) true in an absolute manner are usually referred to as metaphysical necessities or simply necessary truths. Among them, the truths of logic surely have a special status. They are the most general truths on which all others build and which are contained in any other body of truths like, e.g., that physics describes.[2] Their generality has frequently prompted people to the claim that they be purely formal in character, depending only on the interpretation of the logical constants and therefore to be free of any metaphysical commitments. I take the contrary to be true. I take the basic laws of logic to be metaphysical principles which describe the most general constraints on the structure of reality, basic conditions that must be fulfilled in order to pertain to reality in the first place. Their felt strong normative authority is only plausible if they, at least to some extent, mirror the structure of

---

[2] According to classical logic, a proposition p is logically necessary if and only if it is a logical consequence of the axioms of logic if and only if it is a logical truth, that is, true under every interpretation of the non-logical constants.

extra-linguistic reality. Elaborating on this topic, however, would go beyond the scope of this paper.[3]

Two principles will play a special role in our further considerations: the law of identity (LI), and the law of non-contradiction (LNC). By LI we understand both the reflexivity of the identity relation ($\forall x \; x = x$) and the reflexivity of the implication relation ($\forall A \; A \rightarrow A$, if quantification over sentences is allowed). LNC is the principle that no sentence and its negation can both be true ($\forall A \neg (A \wedge \neg A)$).[4]

What LI states may sound like the ultimate triviality: that everything is (at least) what it is. After all, what could there be that would not at least have to be what it is? '*Not to be what one is*' is either simply nonsense or at least a plain contradiction.[5] Clearly, even the not holding of LI would require LI: the state of affairs *LI not holding* would have to be identical to itself in order for LI not to hold.[6] For it to be true that *A = A*, it requires nothing more from *A* than that it exists, which is to say that *to exist* and *to be self-identical* are equivalent, at least according to classical logic.[7] So, if we look for ultimate conditions of reality and truth, there can be no doubt that self-identity is a first candidate.

Another is LNC, the principle which allows for difference and distinction. A distinction requires that something be ruled out, some aspect A such that not both A and not-A simultaneously hold or be the case. With just LI alone it would seem that something might be what it is, but in addition also be what it is not. Only LI together with (at least a partial validity

---

[3] According to Tahko (2009), a strong empirical case for the truth of LNC as a metaphysically necessary principle can be made on the basis of the necessary constraints for the forming of a stable macro-physical world. He relies on the Pauli Exclusion Principle according to which it is impossible for two electrons (or other fermions) in a closed system to occupy the same quantum state at the same time. This particular constraint keeps the atoms from collapsing and thus allows for stable macro-physical objects.

[4] In classical logic, $A \rightarrow A$ is of course equivalent to $\neg(A \wedge \neg A)$, and Leibniz in fact considered LI and LNC as equivalent principles, but we do not want to rule out contradictions in general, not even metaphysically, so we content ourselves with a weak form of LNC. More on that later. Regarding LNC as a metaphysical principle, compare its formulation in Aristotle (Metaphysics 1005b19-20): the same attribute cannot at the same time both belong and not belong to the same subject in the same respect.

[5] If the sentence that some a is not identical to itself is to be formalized as $\exists x \; ((x = a) \wedge \neg (x = a))$.

[6] One might wonder whether a *non-self-identical entity* would be *self-identical*, that is, a non-self-identical entity.

[7] By existential generalization (in first-order predicate logic) we get $a = a \rightarrow \exists x \; x = a$ (and the reverse implication also holds). A Meinongian will of course deny that $a = a$ entails that a exists and hence that to be and to be self-identical are equivalent. She will insist that a round square has self-identity even though no such thing exists.

4

of) LNC seem to guarantee that things are *nothing but what they are* and thus to provide the basis for a differentiated reality.

Now that we know how fundamental LI and LNC are for the constitution of reality, we can ask the question: What is their relation to the ultimate ground of being that theists take to be God? It would seem that as the ultimate ground of being God should also account for what shapes reality at its most fundamental level, for what gives rise to its most basic categories like identity and difference. If not, he does not account for the most important since most fundamental part of reality. So, we feel a tension between two strong but opposing intuitions: On the one hand, it would seem that God should be the ultimate source of absolutely everything, of everything that pertains to reality in the most comprehensive sense. On the other hand there are logical and metaphysical principles which constitute the fundamental conditions of being, like LI and LNC, where it seems that these principles cannot themselves have their source in some particular being (God) upon which they depend. After all, as necessary conditions for any entity's identity and existence, it seems, they must be absolute and metaphysically prior to anything that exists. Even God depends on LI and LNC for his being God.

What has just been described here can be seen as part of the more general question concerning the relation between God and what Morris and Menzel (1986) have called the 'framework of reality.' The latter comprises necessary truths (logical, mathematical, modal, essential) as well as necessarily existent abstract objects (concepts, sets, numbers, properties, relations, propositions, worlds) and constitutes the 'structure that would have to be instantiated by any contingent created universe' (Ibid., 353). We already mentioned the Euthyphro dilemma and that it can be generalized to a modal version: Does God affirm the necessary truths because they are necessarily true, or are they necessarily true just because God affirms them as such? If abstract objects exist, we have the further problem that due to their necessary existence, God would not be the sole necessary being who is creatively responsible for all reality distinct from himself. Even worse, if properties exist independently of God and God has some properties essentially, then God depends for his very being what he is on something distinct from himself.[8] Nevertheless, I will not engage in any attempt to reconcile Platonism with theism in this paper because the problem of God and abstract objects

---

[8] An interesting collection of articles on the problem of God and abstract objects is Gould (2014).

is merely a subsidiary one to the more fundamental problem of God and modality. Indeed, as Alvin Plantinga (1980, 84-92) already pointed out, the real issue with abstract objects is modal rather than ontological, for it is evidently not the mere existence of abstract objects which threatens God's sovereignty and aseity but their *necessary* existence, i.e., their modal status.[9] The problem with abstract objects can be avoided if one is willing to adopt a conceptualist approach where, loosely speaking, *abstracta* are replaced by divine thoughts, or a nominalist position which denies the existence of abstract objects altogether.[10] But, the problem that the necessary truths pose to God's sovereignty remains even after one has removed all abstract objects from one's ontology. Just consider for example that even if there are no properties of *being red* and *being colored*, it is nevertheless necessarily true that whatever is red is colored. Or that even if there are no such things as numbers, it is nevertheless necessarily true that an aggregate of 3 (concrete) things and an aggregate of 2 (concrete) things add up to an aggregate of 5 (concrete) things. Even if nothing at all existed, it seems plausible that it would nevertheless be necessarily true that *if something existed, it would have to be self-identical*, or *if something red existed, it would have to be colored*, and so forth. In other words, modal facts seem to obtain beyond all ontology, and it is usually assumed that God has no control over them. So, as Alvin Plantinga says, 'it is a question not so much of what there is as of what God can do, what is within his control' (Ibid., 92) Nominalism or any other form of anti-realism is of no help in this regard. What is at issue is an account of the relationship between God and the modal truths that does justice to God's sovereignty and ultimacy.

Descartes vs. Leibniz on the Eternal Truths

All theists will agree that the contingent reality is the result of a divine creative activity, that God created the universe (multiverse) with its fundamental physical constituents (whatever those may ultimately be) and the laws of physics. Regarding the necessary truths, however, it seems that even if they were somehow to owe their existence to God, not even God could

---

[9] Were it for God's aseity only, a nominalist or anti-realist view would indeed solve the problem: God would no longer depend on his essential properties existing in some Platonic manner independently of him, yet he could nevertheless be considered omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent, and so on. But, with regard to divine sovereignty a mere change of ontology is ineffectual.

[10] Divine conceptualism is a non-Platonic realism which reduces all abstract objects to some divine intellective activity. It began with Augustine who transposed the Platonic realm of forms into the divine mind, was the major view among medieval thinkers who wrestled with the problem of universals, and is currently again favored by many theist philosophers. Theistic anti-realism is propagated by William Lane Craig. See his *God and abstract objects* (2017).

have made them false, or different propositions necessarily true instead. After all, what sense can we make of a claim like that 2 + 2 = 5, or that Socrates is not (identical with) Socrates? Therefore, it is almost as universal consensus that the necessary truths cannot have been created but must, if at all, depend on God in a different way.

But, there is one famous exception: Descartes, almost uniquely in the history of philosophy, did hold that the necessary truths are a creation of God.

> You ask me by what kind of causality God established the eternal truths. I reply by the same kind of causality as he created all things, that is to say, as their efficient and total cause. (AT I 152, CSMK 25)

Descartes is (in)famous for his doctrine of the creation of the eternal truths (henceforth simply creation doctrine) according to which God established the eternal truths (his term for what we label necessary truths) much like a king laying down laws for his kingdom. There are even passages where he explicitly states that God could have made the negations of eternal truths true.[11] Such statements have baffled generations of philosophers, but Descartes seems to have thought that if anything existed independently of God's will, then God would not be genuinely ultimate. He expresses the worry that if the eternal truths had their truth value and modal status independently of God, then God would be subject to various conditions beyond his control, much like the gods of the ancients: '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' (AT I 145, CSMK 23). Descartes is obviously concerned about God's ultimacy and not content with the mere counterpossible dependence of the eternal truths on God in the sense that if (*per impossibile*) God did not exist, nothing whatsoever would exist or be true.[12] Such a counterpossible dependence of everything on God was already held by more traditional thinkers like Augustine, Aquinas, and Leibniz, but Descartes moreover insists on the free creation of the eternal truths by God, that is, (i) that God voluntarily created them and (ii) that nothing whatever determined God in his creative activity. Descartes' statement

---

[11] For example, AT IV 118, CSMK 235: 'God cannot have been determined to make it true that contradictories cannot be true together, and therefore … he could have done the opposite.'

[12] On the standard Lewis-Stalnaker semantics subjunctive conditionals with impossible antecedents (counterpossibles) are trivially true. Many philosophers regard this as inadequate. They maintain that counterpossibles are sometimes non-vacuously true and sometimes non-vacuously false. In order to allow for such a distinction, the possible-worlds framework is sometimes extended to impossible worlds. See Nolan (1997), or Brogaard and Salerno (2013).

that God *could* have willed that an eternal truth be false has prompted controversial interpretations of his doctrine, yet there are good reasons for thinking that Descartes should not have meant this 'could' modally.[13] For on Descartes own premises, divine freedom is completely pre-modal and not to be construed in terms of alternative possibilities but rather in terms of the absolute indifference of God's will:

> 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. I am not speaking here of temporal priority: I mean that there is not even any priority of order, or nature, or of 'rationally determined reason' as they call it, such that God's idea of the good *impelled* him to choose one thing rather than another. (AT VII 431-2, CSM II, 291-2; emphasis mine)

This complete lack of determination which according to Descartes characterizes God's will also characterizes God's (voluntary) creation of the eternal truths. Hence, as Morris and Menzel already have pointed out, Descartes may have 'failed not by going too far in his assessment of divine activity, but by not going far enough' (Morris and Menzel 1986, 356). Descartes rightly insists that God cannot have been determined by anything whatsoever in his creation of the eternal truths. Yet, he sometimes speaks as if there were meta-modal possibilities for God regarding the shape of the modal space as a whole, such that God could have endowed reality with a different modal framework than he in fact has.[14] But, if *all* modal facts are the result of

---

[13] The interpretative difficulties concern mostly Descartes' insistence on the one hand that although created the eternal truths are nevertheless necessarily true, and his statements on the other hand that God could have made the negations of necessary truths true. On one interpretation known as Universal Possibilism (Frankfurt 1977), Descartes took the eternal truths as 'inherently as contingent as any other proposition.' Its thesis can be stated as: for any proposition *p*, it is possible that *p*. On the interpretation known as Limited Possibilism (Curley 1984), Descartes held the weaker thesis that for any proposition *p*, it is possible that *p* is possible. On the most plausible interpretation, however, it is a decisive feature of the creation doctrine that a proposition is true only if God wills it to be true and that this applies equally to all modal propositions. Therefore, there are no true modal propositions about and prior to God's creation of the eternal (modal) truths by which all modal propositions came to be, and hence Descartes' statements in this respect must either be interpreted non-modally or regarded as simply erroneous. For a clear exposition of these interpretative issues see Kaufman (2002).

[14] According to Leibniz, modality is grounded in the thinking (understanding) of the divine mind. But if so, could God have thought possible worlds governed by different logics? Could God's mind have been structured differently so that it would have given rise to a different modality? These are questions about modality itself, or meta-modal questions. We can, if not imagine, at least abstractly conceive such higher-order modalities. For example, one might consider all sets of sentences that are closed under logical consequence in some particular logic and take that as one modal space. That modal space then would contain all and only those worlds that are possible relative to that particular logic (see Bjerring [2013]). And this construction could be repeated with any

God's creative activity, then prior to God's creation of *all* modal facts, there are no (meta)modal facts about God's creation of the modal facts. There is, so to speak, no higher-order modality framing God's creation of the first-order modality, at least none that would not also have to stem from God's creative activity. So, there really is no sense in which God *could* have made true the negation of a necessary truth which he has made in fact necessarily true; no more than there is a sense in which God *could not* have made true the negation of a necessary truth which he has in fact made necessarily true.[15] Not even the word 'free' in its normal sense applies to God's creative act since prior to his creation of *everything* there was nothing with respect to which God's decisions could have been free.[16]

Whether Descartes was merely inconsequent here or whether our interpretation still misses some point need not really bother us. What is important for our purposes and also uncontroversial is that Descartes took God's creation of the eternal truths to be both free and voluntary. According to him, a proposition *p* is (necessarily) true only if God wills it to be (necessarily) true and no independent factors whatever prevent God from willing not-*p* or impel him to will *p*.

Descartes' creation doctrine has almost universally been dismissed, and even though it has received much attention in recent secondary literature, it is still not taken very seriously as a philosophical doctrine. For many, it is simply too counterintuitive and theists assert that no such view is needed to maintain God's ultimacy. They hold that the latter can be maintained if the eternal truths are grounded not in God's will but in God's nature.

One finds indeed a long tradition for this idea: The theories of Plotinus, Augustine, Aquinas, and Leibniz can all be seen as versions of the view that modal truths ultimately reduce to truths about God's nature. There may be various versions of this view, but all concur in that

---

set of (logical) rules thereby giving rise to a space of (logic-relative) spaces of 'possible' worlds. But, I take it, were modality indeed structured in such hierarchies, God would have to be the creator of the whole hierarchical structure.

[15] A similar point is made in McCann (2012) and in Newlands (2013, 160).

[16] The same argument could equally be used as a response to the charge against divine command theory that it entails that morality is arbitrary. For the charge of arbitrariness relies on the assumption that God *could* have commanded different moral laws than he in fact has; that he could have established, for example, a moral standard according to which it would have been morally right to torture children and to kill people. But, if God has created no such *possibilities* regarding his creation of the moral laws, then this assumption is unwarranted. If God has not also created the modal fact that the moral laws *could* have been different (for example, that he *could* have chosen different propositions as moral laws), then there is no fact of the matter of the moral laws being arbitrary despite their having been commanded by God since there have never been alternatives to the moral laws he has actually created.

the truthmakers of necessary truths are grounded or contained in God's nature.[17] For Aquinas, what delimits the realm of the possible is the range of God's powers; for Leibniz, it is the contents and arrangement of the divine ideas. So, in reply to the earlier quoted statement of Descartes, Leibniz says: 'This so-called *fatum*, which binds even the Divinity, is nothing but God's own nature, his own understanding' (*Theodicy*, sec. 151, as cited in Leftow 2012, 72). For philosophers like Aquinas and Leibniz, it does not matter that the eternal truths are not subject to God's control since they have no other base than in God; they depend solely and entirely on God and nothing else. They are neither more ultimate than God nor subject to God's volition because not even God's willing it could make God's nature from which they derive other than it is. The necessary truths and God's nature (and existence) are on this account ultimately just the two sides of a single fact.

To take stock: without guaranteeing historical accuracy, it seems safe to say that while Descartes thinks that only a *causal dependence* of the eternal truths on God guarantees God's ultimacy, Leibniz thinks that an *ontological* or *explanatory dependence* of the eternal truths on God already suffices. Leibniz considers it sufficient if there is an explanation *in terms of God* for why the necessary truths are as they are; that they are true 'in virtue of' God's being as he is. Contemporary philosophers would call this a grounding relation.[18] Leibniz merely requires from God that everything be grounded in God; that all grounding relations trace back to God as the most fundamental being. If this condition is satisfied, he thinks, God can be regarded as the ground of all reality even though he is not creatively responsible for the necessary truths or has any control over them, since he is nevertheless ontologically the most fundamental being on the basis of which all other reality can be explained. The majority of theist philosophers must have found this line of reasoning convincing since it has become the orthodox view on the subject of God and modality.

Is God Responsible for His Having the Nature He Has?

The main reason why almost every philosopher deems Leibniz's view according to which the necessary truths are grounded in God's nature (Intellect) more plausible than Descartes' view according to which they are the result of God's volition is very likely our strong intuitive

---

[17] Brian Leftow (2012) calls such theories 'deity theories.' A deity theorist is someone who holds that God's nature (deity) makes true all necessary truths including those that are about creatures only.
[18] On the notion of metaphysical grounding, see Bliss and Trogdon (2014).

conviction that the necessary truths are just that: absolutely necessary; under no circumstances could they not have been true and any view suggesting otherwise like Descartes' creation doctrine appears implausible from the outset. With Leibniz's view on the other hand, it seems possible to maintain God's ultimacy, aseity, and sovereignty without the radical implications of Descartes' view. It appears to split the horns of the modal Euthyphro dilemma by letting the necessary truths be absolutely necessary and at the same time be wholly grounded in God. Let us henceforth call the view that the necessary truths are based in God's nature with Brian Leftow a 'deity theory.'[19]

I was never convinced by deity theories. I always wondered whether it really suffices to merely require from God that he be the fundamental being that grounds and explains everything distinct from itself and that does not itself depend for its being on anything distinct from itself, as everyone appears to take it for granted. For this assumption leaves one important question open: If the necessary truths are based in God's nature, yet it is not up to God what his nature is to be (as we probably assume that no being has any choice as to what its nature is to be), *what accounts for God's having the particular nature he has*? Is it really appropriate in this case to say that God himself accounts for his nature and consequently for the necessary truths which derive from it despite the fact that he has his nature completely without his say-so? After all, God was never in a position to choose the attributes that constitute of his nature; he could not decide what he should be.[20] Would it not be more apt to say in this case that a brute metaphysical necessity determines ultimately everything

---

[19] *Deity*, or God's nature, is not to be construed in a Platonist manner, but simply as God's 'identity': What makes God the being he is. A deity theory is accordingly any theory according to which all modal truths are ultimately a function of what God essentially is.

[20] Could God choose his own nature without succumbing to a bootstrapping problem? According to Hugh McCann he does.

> God is, essentially, an act of free will – an act with no prior determination of any kind, in which he freely undertakes in the very action itself to be and to do all that he is and does. … Far from escaping his sovereignty, God's having the nature he does turns out to be *in itself* an exercise of his sovereignty. That is, the reality that is God's having the nature he does is itself the action of his freely undertaking to have it, and all that is essential to him is grounded in this exercise of freedom (McCann 2012, 231).

If I understand this correctly, God's nature here is the 'profile' of an absolutely spontaneous and undetermined divine willing activity. McCann also speaks of God as an event and a dynamic state of affairs (Ibid., 228). But, does this account of divine self-determination avoid all bootstrapping concerns? Would the divine will, in order to freely and spontaneously will anything, not already have to have the (essential) property of being able to will anything? My take on the issue is the following: Is God a being who is subject to the laws of logic and the universal conditions of being, then he cannot choose his own nature; is God on the other hand a being who transcends logical possibility, as McCann has him (Ibid., 235), then why should God care about giving himself a nature in the first place?

including God's nature and existence? And would this not remind us of the Styx and Fates of which Descartes spoke? I share Hugh McCann's intuitions on this point:

> Also excluded   is the possibility that from God's point of view his nature, notwithstanding that it is based on no external exemplar, counts all the same as a *given*: that is, as an ontological reality that God simply *finds* manifested in himself, and over which he exerts no control. According to the sovereignty-aseity intuition, it must somehow be a matter of God's will not only that he be just and loving, but also that he be omniscient and omnipotent, that he be pure act, and all else that pertains to him. Even if they have no being prior to his own, these features cannot pertain to God's nature without his say-so; if they did, his sovereignty would be as much impugned as if they had independent existence as well. (McCann 2012, 214-215)

On the other hand, this intuition is counterbalanced by the also very plausible and intuitive assumption that no individual can determine by its own willing and action what its essential attributes are to be. Just consider, for example, that 'none of us supposes it is or ever was up to us whether to be mammals or amphibians, or to have such capacities as sentience, judgment and reason (McCann 2012, 217). The matters pertaining to our nature as human beings seem to be a condition of our existence and therefore beyond the reach of our decisions and actions. Clearly, in order to decide about my nature, I would already have to have something like a mind that could make the decision. That is to say, some part of my nature – my having a mind – would already have to be given prior to any decision of mine concerning my nature. But, should the very same apply to God? The underlying assumption of deity theories at any rate is that God is no exception to this universal metaphysical condition that no being can choose its own identity (nature). According to it, God, like any other being, *finds* himself endowed with the attributes that (necessarily) characterize his nature. Again Hugh McCann:

> It's not up to him [God] whether to be omniscient and omnipotent, to be perfectly just and loving, to have no unrealized potentialities, or to display any other feature that defines his nature. Like our own essential attributes, these would appear to pertain to him as conditions of his being, independent of any exercise of will on his part. (McCann 2012, 217)

That it is metaphysically fixed *what it is to be God* is undergirded by the fact that it seems possible to arrive at a basic conception of God by pure a priori considerations. As already mentioned at the beginning of the paper, the conception of God as the most perfect being rests crucially on the assumption that our value intuitions have a base in objective axiological features of reality which could not have been other than they are and which are therefore in a sense metaphysically necessary. For example, the deep-seated intuition that underlies in one way or another almost any religion, which links the divine (whatever that may be in the respective case) with goodness. Many theists would consider the idea of God being capable of doing something evil as absurd as the concept of a married bachelor.[21] If this is true, then the idea of God seems to exist in some Platonic sense, as a metaphysically necessary essentialist truth, independent of whether it has an instantiation or not, and the being that is actually God can only conform to what is already metaphysically pregiven.

But, *if God has no choice regarding his nature, in what sense can he be said to be responsible for whatever derives from it* (in our case, the necessary truths)?[22] Of course, a deity theorist will say that God is responsible for his nature and consequently for the necessary truths which

---

[21] As an anonymous reviewer points out, theists like Yujin Nagasawa may be prepared to deny that God is essentially omnibenevolent. The motivation for such a view may be that essential omnibenevolence seems incompatible with moral responsibility, that is, with God's freely choosing the good over the evil. But, if God is not essentially omnibenevolent, he could torture innocent children just for fun; it is just that he *actually* chooses not to (in some possible world he does). I have my doubts that this corresponds to the regular believer's intuitive understanding of God. Goodness is very likely a fixed point concerning God's nature because ethics is central to religion, and then it seems natural to assume that this should have some basis in the divine itself.

[22] One might think that if we were to take this claim seriously, we would have to take the following claim equally seriously: 'If I have no choice regarding my nature – which I clearly do not – in what sense can I be said to be responsible for whatever derives from it?' In fact, this is one of the main arguments for moral responsibility skepticism (see for example Galen Strawson [1994]). It states, in a nutshell, that in order to be truly or ultimately morally responsible for one's actions, one would have to be *causa sui*, a cause of oneself. We are all determined by the genetic, biological and social givens of our existence and these factors shape and impact the 'hardware' of our brains. And, there seems to be no principled reason why such pathological cases like that of the man who developed pedophilic impulses due to a tumor in his brain cannot be generalized to the 'normal' case when, for example, neuroscientists claim that the extent of a person's ability to feel compassion can be read off from microstructural features of that person's brain. To what extent are we responsible for what is more or less hardwired in our brains, for what has its source in our genetic make-up or in the social circumstances under which we grew up? How many of our psychological character traits are ultimately like our intelligence level for which we are clearly not responsible? Nevertheless, there may be differences between God's being determined by his perfect-being nature and a human person's being determined by her human nature. Unlike God's nature, there may be parts of our personal nature that can be shaped by ourselves. The idea here is, roughly, that by performing a serious of actions which contribute to the forming of our character, we may become responsible not only for our character but also for any actions which subsequently issue automatically from it (such character formation plausibly has a physiological basis in the neural plasticity of our brains). So, a human person may at least to a certain extent be responsible for her nature. But, the same is of course not possible with God. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing to this link between divine and human (moral) responsibility.

are grounded in it, not in the sense of moral agency and attributability, but in the broader, purely explanatory sense as in 'the functioning of the thermostat is responsible for the warmness in the room.' But, as already said, we must be accurate here. Is it really apt to say that God is the explanation for the necessary truths? Is it not rather *the metaphysical fact that God has the particular nature he has,* a fact for which God is in no way responsible, that is really the explanation for the necessary truths? If God lacks agency and control with respect to his nature, then it seems what really determines everything at the ultimate level of reality is some kind of 'metaphysical fate.' The facts about God's nature then look to be a metaphysical given, 'an aspect of the universe that – fortunately, we might say, both for [God] and for us – is there, but that unfortunately escapes divine sovereignty' (McCann 2012, 217). God like any other being turns out to be ultimately the result of factors beyond his control. We may call this fate 'metaphysical necessity,' but that does not change the fact that it is in some sense brute (why is the modal space, or God's nature for that matter, as it is?) and beyond God's control.[23] And, this metaphysical fate may well extend beyond the givenness of God's nature. For, as William Rowe (2004) has famously argued, God's nature as an omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly good being may not leave him much libertarian freedom in his actions and creative activity. If that is true, not only what God is but also what he does would be largely determined by a fate that seems to overmaster God almost entirely. Now, even if Rowe's challenges can be met, one is left with the impression that on such an account, God just isn't the real ultimate determiner of all reality and one cannot help judging the Cartesian account where God 'freely' determines the whole of reality as simply more adequate. According to it, God, as a free agent, determines the ultimate conditions and limits of all reality *including the reality he himself is* (if he wishes to be part of reality at all).

---

[23] As already remarked in footnote 14, it seems perfectly sensible to ask the question: Of all of modal space, could it have been shaped differently than it 'actually' is? I do not see how this could be ruled out without begging the question. OK, someone may take the modal space as a whole to be amodal such that no proposition about it has a modal profile. But such a person then cannot claim that the modal space *must* be as it is; its shape then is simply a brute fact (Cowling 2011). According to Leftow (2012, 494), it is a *brute* necessity that a perfect personal God with a limited nature (deity) exists. But if the modal space, or modality itself, is a function of God's nature and the modal space is without modal profile, then it would seem that God is also without modal profile, that is, then it is not true that God *necessarily* exists and *necessarily* has the nature he has.

The Creation Doctrine, Absolute Modality, and Quantum Mechanics

As said, the primary reason for the almost universal rejection of Descartes' creation doctrine, even though it would otherwise seem to imply the more attractive account of God, is no doubt our strong intuitive conviction that modality is absolute. Indeed, the problem for any theist who wishes to claim that God is the source of all truths is that metaphysical modality is taken to be absolute and to include all possibilities regarding all beings including God himself. What is metaphysically necessary just could not have failed to be the case, and what is metaphysically impossible just could not have been the case, 'no matter what', and regardless of what even God could have willed or done. Such an account of absolute modality seems to rule out any account like Descartes' creation doctrine according to which God's free creation of the modal truths renders modality itself in a sense 'divinely contingent.'

However, the Cartesian is not without responses. One would be to maintain that God is *outside of modality*, just as he is often considered to be outside of time.[24] Many philosophers and theologians balk at characterizing God as a determinate, existent individual because they think that that would make God just one more item in one's inventory of reality. But, if God is no item of reality, one would also not expect modal truths to apply to him because the latter, it would seem, can only apply to, or be about, items of reality. One could then maintain the absoluteness of modality with regard to 'all being' but deny that God is a being in any sense that would allow modal truths to apply to him. Indeed, that the source or ground of all being cannot be just another being but must somehow exceed or transcend the categories of being is an ancient idea that has its place in religious as well as philosophical traditions. Perhaps then, it is illegitimate to assert that something is (im)possible with regard to God because such predications are meaningful only when applied to determinate beings.

Another option for the Cartesian would be to question the whole concept of absolute modality. According to Justin Clarke-Doane (2017), for example, no proposition of traditional metaphysical interest is necessary in every non-epistemic sense. Each is necessary in one

---

[24] An anonymous reviewer raised the question: If God is outside modality, then it has never been true that it was possible for God to make our universe. Whence, then, claims about divine creation of our universe? Indeed, in that case, it has never been true that is was possible for God to create the universe (just as it has never been true that it was impossible for God to create the universe); *what is true is only that God created the universe*. Exactly that was already the point in our interpretation of Descartes' creation doctrine: There are no modal truths about God's creative activity because God is always the author of any modal truths which are therefore always the subsequent product of that activity.

sense of 'necessary' and not necessary in another, but no notion of necessity is 'uniquely metaphysically significant' so that it would constitute 'the ultimate court of appeal for modal questions' (Clarke-Doane 2017, 20). Clarke-Doane sees the reason for this in the grounds we usually advance for possibility claims:[25]

> If we judge that P is possible in some non-epistemic sense on the familiar grounds …, then we ought to judge that paradigmatic metaphysical impossibilities are possible in some non-epistemic sense as well. If they are, however, then there is a proposition, P, such that it is possible in some non-epistemic sense that P, though it is not metaphysically possible that P. In other words, metaphysical possibility is not absolute. (Ibid., 5)

For Clarke-Doane, the question of whether any alleged metaphysical necessity is necessary simpliciter is like the question of whether the Parallel Postulate is true *simpliciter* and not understood as a hypothesis about physical space-time. He considers such questions misconceived because like the latter, they have no objective answer (Ibid., 20). As a consequence, he denies any objective boundary between possibility and impossibility. With regard to mathematical truths, for example, we know that they are not logically necessary, and from the perspective of a set-theoretic pluralist there are many notions of set that are satisfied under a Tarskian satisfaction relation. Once it is acknowledged that those other notions of set have equal claim to being satisfied, there seems nothing uniquely metaphysically significant about, say, the well-founded notion of set (Ibid., 21). Clarke-Doane concludes:

> Of course, these considerations do not *entail* that alternative mathematics is possible in some non-epistemic sense. But they do raise the question: what is the principled reason to think that it is *not*? Absent a satisfactory answer to this question, the assumption that alternative mathematical laws are 'absolutely impossible' ought to be met with comparable suspicion as the suggestion that alternative physical laws are absolutely impossible. (Ibid., 7)[26]

---

[25] Clarke-Doane mentions three familiar grounds for judging that *possibly P* from the epistemology of modality literature: (i) because we can conceive of *P*; (ii) because it is not the case that had it been that *P*, then a contradiction would have obtained; and (iii) because *P* has no defeaters (Clarke-Doane 2017, 3-5).
[26] Necessitarianists about the natural laws, i.e., those who take the laws of nature to be metaphysically necessary, of course do maintain that alternative physical laws are absolutely impossible. But that does not detract from our argument.

According to Clarke-Doane, mathematics, logic, and modality each invite a pluralist treatment and hence cannot be considered absolute in any metaphysically significant way. In the sense that there are many real notions of necessity, each affording its own answers to metaphysical questions, there is no objective fact as to how the world could have been (Ibid., 21). Whoever insists that classical logic is the one true logic and its laws self-evident may be 'like the Euclidian geometer, who, when introduced to hyperbolic geometry, insists that his own is uniquely metaphysically significant (as a pure mathematical theory), though he cannot say why. He can only plead that Euclidian points and lines are central to his geometrical thought' (Ibid., 15).

If this is true, our strong intuitive conviction that the necessary truths are unshakable may itself rest on rather shaky grounds. This would rehabilitate Descartes to some extent. After all, the controversial point of Descartes' creation doctrine is the apparent incompatibility of the following two assumptions: (i) that the eternal truths are *absolutely necessary* and (ii) that they are *contingent* upon God's will. But, if the notion of absolute necessity is anyway ill-conceived, perhaps there is nothing to be reconciled with divine contingency. If there is no absolute or otherwise uniquely metaphysically significant notion of necessity, then that the eternal truths are established by God might be just *one sense* in which they are not necessary. They may nevertheless be necessary in the sense of 'concerning all reality other than God', or in the sense of 'being eternally/immutably true.' On a modal pluralist account, there may be many legitimate senses of necessity that could apply here.

Peter Geach once suggested that Descartes' creation doctrine might be defensible if one 'could follow Quine in regarding logical laws as natural laws of very great generality; laws revisable in principle, though most unlikely to be revised, in a major theoretical reconstruction' (Geach 1973, 11). Indeed, the revisability of the laws of logic would seem to preclude their metaphysical necessity even though revisability is first of all an epistemological notion. If it turned out, for example, that superposition in quantum mechanics indeed involved genuine contradictions, then LNC would not be universally valid, i.e., true in every possible world (it would not even be true in the actual world) and consequently not be metaphysically necessary. Now, arguments from quantum mechanics suggesting that there could be true contradictions in the world have been offered. For example, the wave-particle duality and Bohr's complementarity principle are sometimes claimed to involve contradictions, or at least

to generate paradoxical situations. And, recently, da Costa and de Ronde (2013) have suggested that superposition may be better understood if a paraconsistent approach could be adopted. They claim that the properties 'to have spin up in the x direction' and 'to have spin down in the x direction' are contradictory with one another and therefore that a state of superposition of these properties is a contradiction (it attributes both properties to the system). They further claim that this thesis can be generalized for any superposition of states that are classically incompatible. The famous double-slit experiment would accordingly involve a real contradiction (and not only the attribution of contradictory properties in some 'possible realm'): a state $\psi = \phi_1 + \phi_2$ with ϕ_1 meaning that the particle went through the first slit, and ϕ_2 meaning that it went through the second slit, where ϕ_1 and ϕ_2 are supposed to be contradictory.[27] Needless to say that this is controversial, as is almost everything concerning ontological implications of quantum mechanics. What is uncontroversial, however, is that if quantum state evolution proceeds as described by the Schrödinger equation, then typical experiments lead to quantum states that are superpositions of terms that correspond to *distinct* experimental outcomes. So, what seems safe to say about the whole subject (up to now) is that there are sentences α and ¬α referring to a portion of reality that are both regarded as true by scientists. This should give us reason enough to take such proposals seriously. Anyway, the core concepts of quantum mechanics (superposition and entanglement) still seem to lack an adequate logical foundation, and it is not unlikely that it requires another kind of logic to adequately deal with them.[28]

Quantum mechanics is also the domain where the unrestricted validity of LI has been called into question. Indeed, quantum mechanics has difficulties regarding the interpretation of 'particles' and their identity which has led to the idea that quantum particles might be (pace Quine) entities without self-identity, not in the sense of their being different from themselves but in the sense that the concept of identity (or that of equality) does not meaningfully apply to them. Right from the beginning of the theory, the strange statistical behavior of quantum

---

[27] Of course, in order to pass from superposition to contradiction, one has to assume that a vector sum in the Hilbert-space representation amounts to a logical conjunction in the 'underlying reality,' a simultaneous reality of whatever the single vectors represent. In other words, one must assume that the properties corresponding to the vectors in a superposition are all genuinely attributable to the system. QBists (a strand of quantum Bayesianism) deny at all that a quantum state represents a physical system. Rather, they take it to be the epistemic state of an agent who assigns it concerning her own possible future experiences.

[28] It is well known that classical propositional logic is associated with a Boolean algebra, but since the work of von Neumann and Birkhoff in the foundations of quantum mechanics, we know that the lattices associated with quantum systems are not Boolean since they are not distributive.

particles was interpreted by some of its founding fathers as indication that they were dealing with items without identity, in the sense of having no individuality.[29] According to those statistics, swapping two otherwise indiscernible particles in a system does not result in an arrangement that can be distinguished from the original one. Given any observable *O* and a state of two particles, no measurement can distinguish the permuted state from the original one; there simply is no fact of the matter as to which particle is in which state. This was taken to imply that the particles lacked self-identity and has led to the notion of *non-individuals*.[30] Several formal frameworks have since been developed to get a grip on the notion of objects not being self-identical, logics in which the expression x = x is not a well-formed formula in general.[31]

We cannot go into the details of these difficult topics concerning the (non-)identity of quantum particles or the status of LNC within quantum mechanics. And, of course, it would be presumptuous to draw any metaphysical conclusions from these debates.[32] What matters for our purposes is that there are interpretations of quantum mechanics that imply that reality might be in violation of even our most fundamental principles of classical logic and that those interpretations have equal claim to be serious interpretations of quantum mechanics than those which seek to maintain a foundation in classical logic. This fact should already lend some plausibility to an account of logical truth along the lines defended by Quine according to which no statement is immune to revision in the face of empirical evidence, not even 'statements of the sort called logical laws' (Quine 1953, 43). Quines suspicion regarding the intelligibility of

---

[29] According to Schrödinger (1996, 121), '[i]t is not a question of our being able to ascertain the identity in some instances and not being able to do so in others. It is beyond doubt that the question of "sameness", of identity, really and truly has no meaning.'

[30] It was taken that quantum particles did not obey the principle of the identity of indiscernibles (PII) which states that two objects with all the same qualities are identical. But, the crux here is of course what the term 'qualities' in the context of quantum particles is to comprise. The relation 'has opposite component of spin to' would allow electrons to be discerned because no electron has spin opposite to itself, hence if relations of so-called *weak discernibility*, i.e., dyadic relations that are symmetric and irreflexive, are allowed in PII, the received view that quantum particles are non-individuals since indiscernible can be challenged (See for example Saunders [2006]). But, even if the relation of weak discernibility holding between two electrons may ensure that the number of objects is indeed two, it still may fall short of separating them in a way such that they can be successfully identified.

[31] Quasi-set theory has been developed with the specific purpose of encoding in a formal system the idea of non-individuals and collections of non-individuals. It uses first-order logic without identity. See French and Krause (2006, chap. 7). So-called non-reflexive logics are logics in which the relation of identity is restricted, eliminated, or replaced by the weaker relation of indiscernibility. See da Costa and de Ronde (2014).

[32] Again, I am fully aware how controversial things are when it comes to the question of how the world is like according to quantum mechanics. The only thing that seems uncontroversial is that, however we interpret it, it remains a challenge for our intuition (with the possible exception of Bohmian mechanics).

modal metaphysics may have confused metaphysical necessity with analyticity, but his account of the laws of logic as just natural laws of very great generality is in light of modern physics not wholly implausible. After all, who can claim to know the limits of physical reality so that we could be sure that what appears to us as a universal law is not in fact just a local regularity confined to this (possibly very tiny) fraction or scale of reality that is so far accessible to us. We are far from knowing the limits of the actual (world), so how can we claim to know the (absolute) limits of the possible?[33]

Perhaps, then, there is no absolute but only relative modality, modality relative to some conditions that are held fixed such as nomological conditions for nomic possibility, epistemological conditions for epistemic possibility, and logical conditions for logical possibility. Modal metaphysicians who draw a line between relative and absolute modality usually do not regard the principles of classical logic as conditions; they simply assume their universal validity. But, if one considers, as we have just pointed out, that it is not even clear whether they hold unrestrictedly in the actual world, this division between relative and absolute modality appears rather dubious, and with it, the notion of absolute necessity which we identified as the main obstacle for Descartes' creation doctrine. But, if that notion of absolute necessity is given up since it is anyway ill-conceived, the 'divine contingency' of the necessary truths that seems to be a consequence of their having been freely created by God is no more incompatible with their being necessary (in one sense or another) since no sense of 'necessary' is absolute or without any conditions. If that is right, Descartes' creation doctrine may be far less bizarre than always claimed, at least in comparison to the standard view that modality is grounded in God's nature which as we have seen leads to a rather unattractive account of God.

One final consideration in favor of Descartes: the assumption that God has no power over the logical order of reality may also present a problem for our understanding of God as the creator of the contingent reality. For wouldn't we expect God to be wholly autonomous in his acts of creation, so that he alone provides whatever it takes to bring something into existence? However, if the laws of logic are not subject to God's authority, he depends in his acts of creation on something beyond his control. For, clearly, any entity that God creates

---

[33] Chris Mortensen (1989) argues that since all our beliefs are fallible, anything is possible. That may confuse fallibility with possibility, but the view that there is no principled distinction between 'merely epistemic' and real possibility is, I think, defensible.

must have an identity, and hence, it would seem that God must also provide and secure the (self-)identity of the things he creates. If self-identity is a necessary condition for any entity's existence, and God is to be the genuine creator of all contingent entities, then God must also account for the self-identity of any contingent entity. He must secure that whatever it is that he creates, that it is just that and nothing else which, as we know, involves the logical principles LI and LNC: by LI everything is what it is ($A = A$), and by LNC everything is nothing but what it is (it rules out A's being not-A as well).[34] In other words, God's creating activity critically involves applications of LI and LNC notwithstanding that God is supposed to have no power over logical matters. In order to bring something into existence, it would seem that God must also account for what according to the standard view does not lie within the scope of God's authority, namely the logical properties of things, their self-identity, and that they possess no contradictory properties. To be clear, there is no incoherency here, merely an oddness. A proponent of deity theories could reply that the logical conditions and properties are always already provided by God's nature so that God's creative will need only account for the contingent matters. But, as far as I know, no one has as yet investigated this aspect of divine creation, whether such a 'hybrid' account of creation really works, and lack of space prevents me from doing this job here. Descartes' account of creation seems in light of these considerations again to be the more natural one: God's absolute free will determines every aspect of creation. Indeed, it seems natural to assume that the logical and metaphysical principles which govern reality are 'implicitly' established by God's creation of the natures of things as expounded by Hugh McCann using the example of LNC:

[T]o create the nature of any finite entity is to specify not just what the thing is, but also by implication what it is not. Cats are not dogs, nor are they anything else that isn't a cat, and a corresponding point can be made for every nature God creates …. The result is that simply by being what they are, all things succeed in *not* being what they are not, and it is

---

[34] Some qualification is in order here: I do not believe that it requires the universal validity of LNC to get a differentiated and intelligible reality. Just to give one example: Were some otherwise normal apple both green and not-green all over at the same time, the resulting entity would still possess all other characteristic properties of an apple which allowed it to be distinguished from, say, a tomato, banana, or even all other apples not displaying this particular contradictory property. Advocates of paraconsistent logics and in particular dialetheists make exactly this point. Why should a local 'black-hole of contradiction' swallow everything into trivialism or indistinction? However, it seems that for at least some A – whatever that A may stand for – it must be the case that not both A and not-A simultaneously hold or be the case. Otherwise, as Aristotle already made the point, no entity could delimit itself from any other entity and not a single word uttered by anyone could be taken to have a definite meaning.

in this reality that the law of non-contradiction is founded. An argument of this same general sort could … be given for any principle of logic or mathematics. (McCann 2012, 202)

Beyond Existence and Nonexistence

In the preceding sections, we tried to show that, contrary to what most theistic philosophers belief, Descartes' view that the necessary truths are created by God is a serious alternative to the mainstream view that they are grounded in God's nature. But now, let us examine more closely what it may mean that absolutely everything, including the truths of logic and mathematics, is a creation of God. Interestingly, even in those rare cases where such a view has been endorsed, it has usually been nevertheless taken for granted that the standards of coherency must apply to God.[35] But, why should God conform to any standard of coherency if he is the creator of the laws of logic? Because he is perfectly rational? Why should God be perfectly rational if the axiological truth that states that being rational is a value has like any other truth also been created by God himself? Let us hear what Descartes says:

> 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*. (CSM II: 293-294, emphasis mine)

Richard Nozick once speculated that there could be something 'beyond' both existence and nonexistence: 'It is plausible that whatever every existent thing comes from, their source, falls outside the categories of existence and nonexistence. Moreover, we then avoid the question: why does that exist? It doesn't exist' (Nozick 1981, 152). But neither does it not exist. That God (in the exclusive sense of 'or') either exists or does not exist is an instance of another important principle of classical logic, the law of excluded middle (LEM), and it is the assumption that underlies all debates about the existence of God. However, if the laws of logic have been created by God, why should God be subject to LEM? Rather, one would assume that the laws of logic cannot apply to anything prior to their creation, in particular not to their

---

[35] According to McCann (2012) for example, God implicitly establishes the LNC by freely creating things (see the above quote) and is a being 'who by his own choice transcends logical possibility itself' (Ibid., 235). Yet, McCann constantly argues on the basis of LNC and other logical principles when he develops his account of God (Ibid., chap. 11).

creator (although, see below).[36] OK, God may have freely submitted himself 'from all eternity' to the laws he has himself created, as an act of self-determination so to speak,[37] but if he has not done that, debates about his existence or nonexistence could be simply beside the point. In that case, considerations about God's existence or nonexistence would be more like considerations about the color of a proposition, or the blood group of an electron.

What should we make of such a view? We identified LI and LNC as the ultimate conditions of reality and truth: whatever in any sense is, must be what it is and (at least to some extent) not be what it is not. What does not satisfy these (minimal) conditions has no identity and thus is not at all. Thus, there is a sense in which it can be said that by creating these logical principles, God created *being* itself. Without LI and LNC, it makes no sense to say that something is (so), or is not (so), because whatever a sign, term, or expression could refer to, or be about, would at least have to be what it is and not be what it is not. This applies even to what we have just said. Without LI and LNC, it makes not even sense to say that something makes no sense. One cannot say or think anything without presupposing at least the self-identity of what one speaks or thinks about.

It would seem then that we have just demonstrated that there can be nothing beyond logic: If to be is to be self-identical, then without LI which ensures the self-identity of things nothing whatever can be. This is because LI and LNC describe ultimate conditions of being as we said. However, even though this may look like a proof, if one takes it as such, it clearly begs the question. The reason is that every argument must be based on at least a minimal set of (logical) rules, but on which rules could an argument be based that has as one of its premises that no logic whatsoever holds?[38] Our argument merely demonstrates that 'according to

---

[36] The 'prior to' is of course not to be construed as indicating a temporal but a logical or metaphysical order.

[37] Descartes' creation doctrine can be interpreted as an account of divine self-determination. Although God was not determined or necessitated to establish the eternal truths that he did establish, having established them as necessary (in one single act from all eternity), he also determined himself not to be able to change or violate them. In particular, since essentialist truths are eternal truths, the essentialist truths about *what it is to be God* have likewise been established by God.

[38] This is a common mistake in discussions about the scope of absolute omnipotence. Bernard D. Katz, for instance, argues that 'if God is an absolute, unconditioned reality, then there must be truths that are independent of God's power.' If God's power were unlimited even by the truths of logic, he says, the various possible worlds would have nothing in common, for to suppose that some truth were to hold in every possible world would be to imagine a constraint on God's power, and then no being including God could have any essential properties. Thus, 'on the supposition that there is an omnipotent being whose power is unlimited even by the truths of logic, *one must conclude* that no being is independent of external conditions for its existence or nature. Indeed, *one must conclude* that no being has any essential properties and, in particular, no being exists necessarily' (Katz 2003, 5-6, emphasis mine). But how can he conclude this when the premise is

logic,' there can be nothing beyond logic which is just like the claim that there can *be* nothing beyond being. Both claims are certainly true, but they miss the point am trying to make.

The crucial point here is that without LI and LNC even negation, or what the term 'not' signifies or refers to, has no '(self-)identity,' and with it related terms like 'nothing' and 'nonexistence.' Clearly, even negations involve some sort of (self-)identity. For *what is absent, nonexistent, or not the case, must at least be that: absent, nonexistent, or not the case* ($\neg A \rightarrow \neg A$); it cannot then be present, existent, or the case, without violating the very semantic function of negation. Without LI and LNC, it makes not only no sense to say that something exists; it makes equally no sense to say that something does not exist. For example, in order for it to be true that Socrates does not exist 'there must be (so to speak) something that specifies what there is not as Socrates and the property he would otherwise have as self-identity: if not properties of being Socrates or self-identity, or a particular proposition built of concepts of these, then something else playing this role' (Leftow 2012, 138 fn.). But, none of these items is available without LI and LNC. It is really that in a sense *both existence and nonexistence 'come into existence' with the establishment of the laws of logic*, just as any other category of being and thought. Hence, if the laws of logic have been created by God, the classical doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is false because in that case, God has created 'nothing' itself.

One might think that our account leads to sheer transcendence where nothing of the 'familiar' conception of God remains. But that is not so. Consider again self-identity, the unique relation that everything has to itself and to nothing else. Without LI (and LNC) ensuring the self-identity of things, everything can be distinct from itself and identical with everything else. This applies even to the 'beyond logic' itself. That is to say, what is beyond logic need not be so. *The laws of logic may hold just in case they do not hold*. If LNC does not hold, the laws of logic may both hold and not hold at the same time. And, if LI does not hold the state of affairs *the laws of logic holding* may be identical with the state of affairs, *the laws of logic not holding*. And the very same applies to any other item of reality, and *at all levels*: The identity

relation may be identical with the distinctness relation (or with a water flea, or a Christmas carol); coherency may coincide with incoherency, or both may coincide and exclude each other at the same time (or both coincide and exclude each other and not both coincide and exclude each other at the same time, and so on). The 'beyond logic' leaves everything open, including the 'possibility' of God being perfectly logical, and limited/determined in any way, and even absolutely so.[39]

In his book, *Does God Have a Nature?*, Alvin Plantinga addresses some of the same topics that concern us here, and he comes to the conclusion that in the end it all boiled down to a conflict between two intuitions: 'the intuition that some propositions are impossible and the intuition that *if God is genuinely sovereign, then everything is possible*' (Plantinga 1980, 139, italics added). Concerning the latter intuition, he says: 'Descartes sees the situation clearly; he sees that if we take the sovereignty-aseity intuition with real seriousness, we shall be *obliged* to suppose that every proposition is within God's control' (Ibid., 125, italics added). But, this is a complete underestimation of God's sovereignty. If every proposition is within God's control, then this very proposition, i.e., that every proposition is within God's control, is itself within God's control and hence God can make it false. In other words, if absolutely everything is within God's control, then (the range of) God's control is itself within God's control. There is no sense in which God's genuine sovereignty would 'entail' anything like universal possibilism, or indeed anything at all (not even that it does not entail anything).[40] If God is not bound by the laws of logic, then we cannot even *conclude* that God is not bound by the laws of logic. God's genuine sovereignty leaves absolutely everything open, and contrary to Plantinga's claim there can be all sorts of absolutely impossible propositions even if God is genuinely sovereign.

Peter Geach once defined absolute omnipotence as the power to do 'everything that can be expressed in a string of words that makes sense; even if that sense can be shown to be self-contradictory' (Geach 1973, 9). But, why should God merely be capable of doing what can be expressed in a string of words that makes sense if he is not limited by the laws of logic? 'Being able to do everything,' without Geach's further qualification, would equally be a string of words that made sense, as would be 'being able to make the senseless sensible.' But, of

---

[39] So, God could be genuinely ultimate even if he is in fact merely a 'preliminary' reality.
[40] This is why we always only say 'may/could', and never 'must', when we describe what our account of a god beyond logic may involve.

course, the point here is that it should be God himself who determines what makes sense and what does not. If he is to be the ultimate determiner of reality, we should expect him to determine every aspect of reality, including what 'is', 'not', '(non)sense', '(non)existence, 'identical', 'different', '(im)possible', 'because/by virtue of', 'truth', 'value', 'everything', 'absolute', 'God', or any other possible concept signifies or refers to. There can be nothing that is not freely determined by God unless God freely determines it as such, i.e., as not freely determined by God.

Absolute omnipotence has also been defined as the power to have any proposition be true and any proposition be false (Conee 1991, 451). But, again, that cannot mean that God just assigns truth-values to a given class of propositions. The 'range' of reality that is determined by the class of all propositions (as well as the range of all truth-values) must itself be freely determinable by God if he is to be absolutely omnipotent. From the perspective of absolute omnipotence, God could have created realities beyond all limits of logic, sense, or whatever, including something absolutely 'greater' than himself. Indeed, *absolute* omnipotence means that God can be absolutely 'greater' (more 'God') than God, i.e., absolutely 'greater' than which absolutely nothing can be 'greater' (the ultimate impossibility). And even that would be just the beginning. For what is beyond logic is not at all, as one might think, exhausted by the impossible, or by what is represented by impossible worlds. The reason is that impossibilities can be described; they remain within a domain where identity holds sway. Impossibilities arise where the logical or metaphysical order of the possible is violated in some way. The round square, for example, is a conjunction of the 'possible' universals roundness and squareness in a logically or metaphysically illicit manner. And, an impossible world is a set of propositions or sentences of a 'world-making' language that cannot all be true together. But, in both cases, we have a more or less clear-cut identity: The round square has identity at least in the sense of being distinguishable from whatever is not both round and square, and an impossible world represents a particular and distinguishable way things or the world could not be (it has content, however 'nonsensical' that content may be). Impossibilities violate logical or metaphysical principles, but they are, at least to a certain degree, determinate and describable. What is beyond logic, however, may have no identity at all, not even that of *having no identity*.[41] It is not nothing because, as remarked above, even 'nothing' involves

---

[41] It does not matter that this statement may be self-refuting since coherency is not a condition of the present account which takes God to be beyond logic.

some kind of identity (that has nothing to do with a reification of the notion). It may fall under no category of being or thought, not even that of the impossible, because everything pertaining to being or thought (in whatever sense) relies in at least some way on identity, is in at least some respect 'something.' That would even apply to 'what were in no respect anything.'

Let us leave it at that. We have pushed the notion of God to its ultimate level of abstraction: absolutely nothing conditions God, and not even *that* is to be taken as a condition for God. I understand it if one feels a natural resistance against such a view. After all, what sense can we make of claims like that (possibly) God neither exists nor does not exist? On the other hand – we briefly dealt with quantum mechanics – we already have difficulties making sense of the phenomena of our physical reality at the very small and the very large scale, so why should we expect God to be any less counterintuitive than his creation already is? What quantum mechanics at least shows us is that our intuitive notions of what makes sense are very unreliable guides to truth. So why should not the same be the case with regard to what we take to be necessary truths?[42] No doubt, much more could be said against our view (however, not that it is absurd or incoherent), most seriously perhaps that its notion of a god beyond logic is empty since not meaningfully analyzable. But, as far as I can tell, it is far from clear where the dividing line between sense and nonsense is to be drawn. Rather, in many cases, both seem in a dialectical manner intertwined with one another so that no clear-cut dividing line between them can be found. Since that however is another topic that cannot be dealt with here, I leave the last words to Descartes:

> [S]ince every basis of truth and goodness depends on his omnipotence, I would not dare to say that God cannot make a mountain without a valley, or bring it about that 1 and 2 are not 3. I merely say that he has given me such a mind that I cannot conceive a mountain without a valley, or a sum of 1 and 2 which is not 3; such things involve a contradiction in my conception. (CSMK, 358-9)

---

[42] As Beebe (2011) shows, even what we call a priori knowledge, i.e., the knowledge of logical, mathematical and other 'self-evident' truths, succumbs to serious epistemological challenges, notwithstanding that many philosophers may think that such skepticism must be self-defeating.

References

Aristotle (1984). *Metaphysics*, trans. W. D. Ross, revised by J. Barnes, Princeton: Princeton UP.

Beebe, J. R. (2011). A Priori Skepticism. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 83(3), 583-602.

Bjerring J. C. (2013). On Counterpossibles. *Philosophical Studies*, 2, 1-27.

Bliss, R., & Trogdon, K. (2014). Metaphysical Grounding. In *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: N/A

Brogaard, B., & Salerno, J. (2013). Remarks on Counterpossibles. *Synthese*, 190 (4), 639-660.

Clarke-Doane, J. (2017). Modal Objectivity. Forthcoming in *Nous.*

Conee, Earl (1991). The Possibility of Power beyond Possibility. *Philosophical Perspectives* (5), 447-473.

Cottingham J., Stoothoff R., and Murdoch D. (1985). *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vols. 1 and 2, Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

Cottingham J., Stoothoff R., Murdoch D., and Kenny A. (1991). *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 3, Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

Cowling, S. (2011). The Limits of Modality. *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 61 (244), 473-495.

Craig William Lane (2017). *God and Abstract Objects. The Coherence of Theism: Aseity*, Springer.

Curley, E. (1984). Descartes on the Creation of Eternal Truths. *Philosophical Review*, 93, 569-597.

Da Costa N. C. A., & de Ronde, C. (2013). The Paraconsistent Logic of Superpositions. *Foundations of Physics*, 43, 854-858.

Da Costa N. C. A., & de Ronde, C. (2014). Non-Reflexive Logical Foundations for Quantum Mechanics. *Foundations of Physics*, 44**,** 1369-1380.

Frankfurt, H. (1977). Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths. *Philosophical Review*, 86(1), 36-57.

French S., & Krause, D. (2006). *Identity in Physics: A Historical, Philosophical, and Formal Analysis.* Oxford: Oxford UP.

Geach, P. T. (1973). Omnipotence. *Philosophy,* 48(183), 7-20.

Gould, P. M. (Ed.) (2014). *Beyond the Control of God? Six Views on the Problem of God and Abstract Objects*. New York NY: Bloomsbury Academic.

Katz B. D. (2003). On the Limits of Divine Power. *Sophia*, 42(1), 1-7.

Kaufman, D. (2002). Descartes' Creation Doctrine and Modality. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 80(1), 24-41.

Leftow, B. (2012). *God and Necessity*. Oxford: Oxford UP.

Mann, W. E. (1989). Modality, Morality, and God. *Nous*, 23(1), 83-99.

McCann, H. J. (2012) *Creation and the Sovereignty of God.* Bloomington: Indiana UP.

Morris, T. V., & Menzel, C. (1986). Absolute Creation. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 23(4), 353-362.

Mortensen, C. (1989). Anything is Possible. *Erkenntnis*, 30(3), 319-337.

Newlands, S. (2013). Leibniz and the Ground of Possibility. *Philosophical Review*, 122, 155-187.

Nolan, D. (1997). Impossible Worlds: A Modest Approach. *Notre Dame Journal of Formal Logic*, 38(4), 535-572.

Nozick, R. (1981). *Philosophical Explanations.* Cambridge: Belknap Press.

Plantinga, A. (1980). *Does God have a Nature?* Milwaukee: Marquette UP.

Quine, W. V. (1953). *From a Logical Point of View*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP.

Rowe, W. L. (2004). *Can God Be Free?* Oxford: Oxford UP.

Saunders, S. (2006). Are Quantum Particles Objects. *Analysis*, 66**,** 52-63.

Schrödinger, E. (1996). *Nature and the Greeks and Science and Humanism.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

Strawson, G. (1994). The Impossibility of Moral Responsibility. *Philosophical Studies*, 75(1-2), 5-24.

Tahko, T. E. (2009). The Law of Non-Contradiction as a Metaphysical Principle. *Australasian Journal of Logic*, 7, 32-47.

Tillich, P. (1955). *Biblical Religion and the Search for Ultimate Reality*. Chicago: Chicago UP.