

5 DESCARTES ON UNIVERSAL ESSENCES AND DIVINE KNOWLEDGE

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5.1. Introduction

It is sometimes said that early modern rationalism can be characterized as an attempt to vindicate Plato's philosophy over against Aristotle's thought, which informed much of scholasticism.¹ As a general statement, this assertion has much to recommend it, but, as one might expect, the relation between seventeenth-century rationalism and Platonism is rather complex. Descartes's philosophy provides a striking example of this complexity. There are many Platonic doctrines that Descartes accepts or at least adapts for his own purposes, such as the theory of innate ideas and the doctrine of mind-body dualism. But his philosophy also contains a potent strain of anti-Platonism in its account of the ontological status of universal essences and eternal truths. This strain runs deep in his thought and can be found as far back as the *Regulae*, where he insists that number is not distinct from the thing numbered and cautions readers against the temptation to reify mathematical objects—in effect, to fall prey to Platonic realism—a temptation to which he thinks every mathematician succumbs (Rule 14, AT 10:445–46; CSM 1:61).² Later, in a series of articles in the *Principles of Philosophy* devoted to laying out his metaphysics in a systematic manner, Descartes says that universals such as a triangle or the number two are merely ideas or ways of thinking and, further, that eternal truths have a “seat within the human mind” (AT

1. See, e.g., Jolley 1990, introduction.

2. Any divergences from the translations given in CSM are my own.

8–1:27–28, 23–24; CSM 1:210, 209). Far from endorsing Platonism, Descartes explicitly affirms a conceptualist account of abstract entities.

Despite these and other such passages, some English-speaking commentators going back to Anthony Kenny (1970) and Alan Gewirth (1970, 1971), have been mesmerized by the Fifth Meditation, where, as a preface to the ontological argument, Descartes asserts that objects such as a triangle, even if they do not exist anywhere outside our thought, have “immutable and eternal” natures, essences, or forms that do not depend on the human mind (AT 7:64, CSM 2:45). On the basis of these remarks, Kenny (1970, 685–700) reads Descartes as positing a third realm of abstract entities—distinct from created substances and distinct from God—and declares him to be “the father of modern Platonism.”³ In a previous essay, I argued that contrary to Kenny the apparent Platonism of the Fifth Meditation is just that—apparent—and that Descartes’s claims about true and immutable natures are easily reconciled with the explicit conceptualism of the *Principles* (Nolan 1997a; also see Nolan 1998). I was not alone. Focusing largely on the *Principles*, Vere Chappell (1997) drew the same conclusion, namely, that Descartes reduces mathematical essences, and the eternal truths concerning them, to the objective being of innate intellectual ideas in the human mind.

But the Platonist reading of Cartesian universals dies hard. Since Kenny wrote on this topic, a couple of notable commentators have proposed that Descartes locates essences, and the eternal truths concerning them, in God. Let us refer to this general interpretation of Cartesian essences as “Theological Platonism” (to borrow a term from Émile Bréhier). Most recently, Marleen Rozemond (2008) has argued that it is open to Descartes to embrace Duns Scotus’s view that essences have objective being in the divine intellect.⁴ Rozemond’s interpretation harks back to an essay published by Tad Schmaltz (1991), who argues that eternal truths and essences are divine decrees.⁵ Both essays are inspired by Descartes’s claim that essences are “immutable and eternal”; Rozemond and Schmaltz maintain that Cartesian essences can possess these attributes only if they exist in God.

3. Cf. Kenny 1968, where he compares true and immutable natures, or their objects, to Meinongian pure objects, which are subjects of true predication whether or not they exist.

4. In another recent paper, Raffaella De Rosa (2011) expresses qualified support for different aspects of both Theological Platonism and the Conceptualist Interpretation but does not endorse either position on the grounds that neither fully accounts for all of the strands in Descartes’s treatment of created essences. De Rosa’s goals, as she describes them, are mainly negative: she claims that neither of the two main interpretations satisfies all of Descartes’s commitments, but that is because she sees him as holding inconsistent views. I maintain that Descartes’s view is consistent.

5. Schmaltz has told me in conversation that he is no longer committed to the Platonist reading of Descartes. Also see Schmaltz 2002, 83, fn. 21 and chapter 6 in this volume.

Besides lacking direct textual support, the main problem with Theological Platonism is that it violates the Christian doctrine of divine simplicity, at least as it was understood by Descartes. While many medieval philosophers held that creaturely essences reside in the divine understanding as ideas, Descartes's strict conception of divine simplicity—which entails that in God understanding and willing are the same—forces him to reject the traditional account of essences as divine ideas. This brings me to the topic of this chapter. I intend to develop a new defense of the conceptualist account of Cartesian universals that places special emphasis on the simplicity of Cartesian substances, both created and divine. I argue that Descartes's account of universals, while conceptualist in character, is motivated by one of Plato's most seminal insights. Plato held that the ultimate constituents of reality—the most fundamental entities in the metaphysical universe—are perfectly simple. Descartes's account of universals is best read in the context of this Platonic intuition.⁶ As a consequence of the simplicity of Cartesian substances, universal essences cannot exist as discrete entities in God nor as distinct constituents of created minds and bodies. They can exist only as ideas in human minds. There is a notable irony here: Descartes is led by a Platonic premise to reject all forms of realism about universals, Platonic or otherwise. Within a Christian philosophical context, one form of Platonism supplants another. The relation that Cartesianism bears to Platonism is complex indeed.

In the next section, I begin by arguing for the simplicity of all Cartesian substances, both created and divine, and then use this doctrine to uncover the philosophical motivation for Descartes's conceptualism regarding universals. This discussion further develops the conceptualist reading and explains why even moderate forms of realism, which locate universals in created things, are barred to Descartes. I also argue that the doctrine of simplicity precludes Descartes from locating creaturely essences and eternal truths in God, contrary to Theological Platonism. In section 5.3, I consider Rozemond's recent attempt to accommodate divine simplicity within Theological Platonism and show why it fails. This discussion raises an important question about the nature of divine knowledge. As an omniscient being, God knows created things, but how does he know them? A standard medieval account of divine knowledge held that God knows creatures by cognizing their ideational archetypes in his understanding. But if, as I claim, Descartes rejects the traditional theory of divine ideas, then God must know creatures in some other way. In section 5.4, I argue that Descartes is committed to a view like that of Ockham, who holds that the objects of divine cognition are created things themselves ("Divine Direct Realism"). In section 5.5, I answer

6. The simplicity of being is of course a theme running throughout ancient Greek philosophy.

objections to the Conceptualist Interpretation, including the objection that it cannot account for the sense in which Cartesian essences and truths are immutable and eternal.

5.2. The Simplicity of Cartesian Substances

I begin by characterizing what I take to be Descartes's most fundamental metaphysical intuitions. The simplicity of substances is one of these intuitions, but not his only or most basic one. Once we have an appreciation of his most fundamental intuitions, we can gain a better purchase on where universals and eternal truths fit within his metaphysics and will also be able to understand what motivates his conceptualism.

5.2.1. *Descartes's First Intuitions*

A common refrain of many early modern philosophers is that only particulars exist. This principle is of course an affirmation of antirealism about universals. Descartes subscribes to this principle himself, but it is not one of his first intuitions. Instead, he takes as his starting place what particular things or substances exist or, more exactly, *could* exist. His clear and distinct ideas reveal the limits of what is conceptually possible with respect to the particular inhabitants of the metaphysical universe. Here we can take our bearings from the *Meditations*. If one reflects on the clear and distinct ideas that he enumerates over the course of this work, it is notable that they are mostly ideas of particular substances. First and most importantly, there is the idea of God or the infinitely perfect substance. This is not the idea of being in general, as it is for Aquinas or even for Malebranche, Descartes's successor. The idea of God that one discovers in the Third Meditation—what Descartes calls the “mark of the craftsman stamped on his work”—is the idea of something that is actually infinite, but nevertheless particular. Second, there is the idea of the mind as a thinking thing. This is not the idea of thought in general but the idea of one's own mind or self, as Descartes makes clear in the Third Meditation (AT 7:51, CSM 2:35). We can of course form the idea of thought in general or universal thought, but this is not one of our most fundamental ideas. And finally, there is the idea of body. On this topic, there is much controversy. Does Descartes think there are many corporeal substances or only one, namely, the whole material plenum? Fortunately, we do not need to resolve this debate. It suffices for our purposes to note that whether there is one such body or many, the substance or substances in question are particular, and hence the idea (or ideas) of corporeal substance(s) that one entertains in the

context of the *Meditations* is (are) also particular.⁷ So, to summarize, Descartes's first intuitions are about what things there are or could be, and these all turn out to be particular substances.

5.2.2. *Divine Simplicity*

With this list of particular substances in hand, Descartes's strategy is to reduce most other putative entities to one of them or, in the case of finite substances, to one of their modes. This reductionist strategy is motivated by a second intuition of his metaphysics, namely that all substances, whether created or divine, are simple. Most Christian philosophers endorse divine simplicity in some form or other, but Descartes understands this doctrine strictly and draws out its implications for the nature of divine creation in a way that no philosopher had done before. As we shall see, he also extends the doctrine of simplicity to finite, created substances, at least with respect to their attributes. I begin, however, with the case of divine simplicity, since God constitutes the paradigm of a simple substance.

Descartes's statements of this doctrine are few in number in his published writings but explicit and unequivocal. Here are two such passages, from the Third Meditation and the *Principles of Philosophy*, respectively.

[1] The unity, the simplicity, or the inseparability of all the attributes of God is one of the most important of the perfections which I understand him to have. (AT 7:50, CSM 2:34)

[2] There is always a single identical and perfectly simple act by means of which he simultaneously understands, wills and accomplishes everything. (AT 8–1:14, CSM 1:201)

In the second passage, we begin to get a sense of just how strictly Descartes understands divine simplicity: God does everything by one perfectly simple act, without any priority between understanding and willing. Here we might wonder why, of all of God's faculties or attributes, Descartes stresses intellect and will in his effort to illustrate divine simplicity. The answer is not difficult to discern, given Descartes's philosophical inheritance. In the Middle Ages, it became standard among Christian philosophers to explain creation

7. Jonathan Bennett (2001, vol. 1, 136) asserts that if Descartes is a monist regarding corporeal substance, then matter is a mass noun, not a count term. It would thus be a mistake on this view to say that corporeal substance is particular. I think I can accept this proposal without doing violence to my general point, which is that Descartes's first intuitions are not about kinds.

in quasi-Platonic terms. Inspired by Plato's *Timaeus*, in which the Demiurge or divine craftsman creates the universe according to rational, purposive principles, many medieval philosophers going back to Augustine maintained that God creates the universe via ideas of possible creatures, which exist in his intellect prior to his creative activity. This is the doctrine of exemplary causation, according to which God creates the universe via ideas or archetypes in his intellect. The point of this doctrine is to make creation intelligible and rational. Philosophers who endorse this view of creation are sometimes called "divine intellectualists" because of their emphasis on the priority of God's intellect over his will. Descartes is clearly rejecting divine intellectualism when he says that God simultaneously wills and understands everything in one perfectly simple act. Indeed, it is often noted that Descartes is a divine voluntarist in that he makes everything depend on God's will. One reason that Descartes stresses divine simplicity in this context is because he thinks that the Platonic account of creation anthropomorphizes, and thus debases, God. Just before the sentence quoted in passage [2], he writes: "And even his [God's] understanding and willing does not happen, as in our case, by means of operations that are in a certain sense distinct one from another" (AT 8-1:14, CSM 1:201). In creating the world, God is not like a human architect or craftsman, who must look to an idea or blueprint in his intellect prior to creation.

When the doctrine of divine simplicity appears in Descartes's correspondence, it is typically linked more explicitly to his creation doctrine, which states that everything finite is created, including essences and eternal truths. The following passages from two early letters to Mersenne are representative.

[3] As for the eternal truths, I say once more that <they are true or possible only because God knows them as true or possible. They are not known as true by God in any way which would imply that they are true independently of him>. If men really understood the sense of their words they could never say without blasphemy that the truth of anything is prior to the knowledge which God has of it. *In God willing and knowing are a single thing in such a way that <by the very fact of willing something he knows it and it is only for this reason that such a thing is true>* (To Mersenne, May 6, 1630, AT 1:149; CSMK 24; emphasis added; angle brackets indicate Descartes's use of Latin in a French context).

[4] You ask me <by what kind of causality God established the eternal truths>. I reply: <by the same kind of causality> that he created all things, that is to say, as their <efficient and total cause>. *For it is certain that he is the author of the essence of created things no less than of their existence; and this essence is nothing other than the eternal truths. . . .*

You ask also what necessitated God to create these truths; and I reply that he was free to make it not true that all the radii of the circle are equal—just as free as he was not to create the world. And it is certain that these truths are no more necessarily attached to his essence than are other created things. You ask what God did in order to produce them. I reply that <from all eternity he willed and understood them to be, and by that very fact he created them>. Or, if you reserve the word <created> for the existence of things, then he <established them and made them>. *In God, willing, understanding and creating are all the same thing without one being prior to the other <even conceptually>* (To Mersenne, May 27, 1630, AT 1:151–53; CSMK 25–26; emphasis added).

Many readers have found Descartes's doctrine of the creation of the eternal truths to be bizarre and even incoherent. What would possess him to hold this doctrine, which is unprecedented in the history of philosophy and which seems to have disastrous consequences for the possibility of knowledge and for the status of necessary truths? Some recent scholarship has attempted to answer this question by pointing to the doctrine of divine simplicity.⁸ These passages provide strong evidence that Descartes did indeed see the creation doctrine as a direct consequence of divine simplicity. Note that in both of them he follows his assertion of the creation doctrine with an affirmation of divine simplicity, understood in the strictest sense. The reason everything is created, including essences and the eternal truths concerning them, is *because* in God willing, understanding, and creating are the same, which is just to say that whatever he understands he wills (and vice versa), without any priority or distinction between them *in re*. My aim in section 5.4 will be to show that the doctrine of divine simplicity also has important consequences for the nature of God's knowledge of creation.

Before moving on, I want to draw attention to one other point in passage [4] that is crucial for understanding Descartes's account of essences. In the first few lines he identifies the eternal truths with the essences of created things ("this essence is nothing other than the eternal truths").⁹ Descartes's statement is important because it means that any claims that he makes about the status of eternal

8. See, most notably, Nelson 1993, 686f., and Walski 2001 and 2003.

9. What explains this statement is that eternal truths are generally truths about essences, but not just any truths. In at least some cases they are definitional. The scholastics spoke here of essential predications, such as man is a rational animal or, to pick a more Cartesian example, a triangle is a three-sided polygon. This is why Descartes sometimes treats essences and the eternal truths concerning them as merely rationally distinct. See Nolan 2015 for further discussion of this latter point.

truths are also claims about the status of essences and vice versa. We should keep this in mind as we move forward.¹⁰

5.2.3. *The Simplicity of Created Substances*

Now that we have a sense of Descartes's conception of divine simplicity, let us turn to the simplicity of created substances. Created substances are of course not perfectly simple in the way that God is. They admit of modal variation both synchronically and diachronically. My body, for example, has a certain shape, size, and motion (or rest) at any given time, and these properties can vary with diet, age, exercise, and so on. My mind too thinks of different things over time and, by Descartes's lights, could be entertaining two thoughts simultaneously.¹¹ By contrast, God—being immutable—admits of neither type of modal variation (AT 8–1:26, CSM 1:211). But for the present purposes, the fact that created substances have diverse modes is irrelevant. For my aim in this section is to show that these substances do not have common constituents. There are no universals in created substances because they do not admit of composition. Modes are not constituents of finite substances but ways of being those substances. And, as a result of the intimate relation between a substance and its modes, it is impossible for modes to be shared by, or common to, multiple substances. Descartes confirms this in his definition of a modal distinction in the *Principles*, where he says that the modes of any two substances are really distinct (AT 8–1:30, CSM 1:214).

Descartes's austere substance-mode ontology marks a stark contrast to the ontologies of the scholastic Aristotelians. According to the latter, a created substance is the subject of various forms of composition—for example, matter and form, substantial form and accidental forms, act and potency, essence and existence, and so on. By banishing all such composition, and conceiving substances as simple, Descartes leaves no room for universals within the created universe. The only things that exist are particular substances and their attributes and modes. As was just noted, modes are simply ways of being those particular substances and, as we shall see in what follows, the attributes of a substance are merely rationally distinct from it. What motivates this move away from scholastic composition? Part of the answer is Descartes's new conception of matter in terms of geometrical extension alone, shorn of the faculties, qualities, forms, and potentialities of his predecessors. But a more basic answer, which precludes universals from being

10. Incidentally, the defenders of Theological Platonism and I agree on this point. See, e.g., Rozemond 2008, 41.

11. See *Conversation with Burman*, AT 5:149; CSMK 3:335.

constituents of either bodies *or* minds, is the Platonic intuition that the most fundamental entities—namely, particular substances—are simple.

In a series of articles devoted to setting forth his metaphysics in the *Principles of Philosophy*, Descartes stresses this simplicity in a couple of different ways. The strongest statement of it appears in his discussion of the theory of distinctions, particularly in his definition of the notion of a rational distinction in part I, article 62. There, he says that a substance and each of its attributes, or any two attributes of a single substance, are merely rationally or (as translated by CSM) conceptually distinct (*distincta ratione*). The force of this claim is not fully clear until one, first, understands what he means by it and, second, considers his examples of attributes. To address the first point, I have argued elsewhere that what it means to say that two things are merely rationally distinct is that they are numerically identical in reality and distinguished only within our thought; hence the term “distinction of reason” (*distinctio rationis*).¹² The scholastics spoke here of a “real identity” between the terms of a rational distinction. We have already seen Descartes affirm this identity thesis with respect to the divine attributes, specifically divine will and intellect. Immediately after defining the notion of a rational distinction in article 62 of the *Principles*, he also affirms this identity thesis in the case of a created substance and its essence or principal attribute:

[5] Thought and extension can be regarded as constituting the natures of intelligent substance and corporeal substance; they must then be considered as *nothing else but thinking substance itself and extended substance itself*—that is, as mind and body. (AT 8–1:30–1, CSM 1:215; emphasis added)

So corporeal substance is not a substratum that underlies its extension. It just is its extension. Likewise, my mind just is its thinking. We will encounter further affirmations of the identity thesis in a moment, but I would like to turn now to the other issue I posed regarding a rational distinction, namely, the extension of the term “attribute” for Descartes. What counts as an attribute in Descartes’s technical sense of something that is merely rationally distinct from a substance? As it turns out, thought and extension are not the only attributes of minds and bodies, respectively. In other articles in the *Principles*, part I, he lists four generic attributes—viz., existence, duration, order, and number or unity—which every substance possesses. This means that the essence and existence of any substance, whether created or divine, are merely rationally distinct, a thesis that Descartes

12. See Nolan 1997b and 1998.

explicitly confirms in a letter written to an unknown correspondent shortly after publishing the *Principles*.

[6] I do not remember where I spoke of the distinction between essence and existence. However, I make a distinction <between modes, strictly so called, and attributes, without which the things whose attributes they are cannot be; or between the modes of things themselves and the modes of thinking [*modos cogitandi*]> . . . <Thus shape and motion are modes, in the strict sense, of corporeal substance; because the same body can exist at one time with one shape and at another with another, now in motion and now at rest; whereas, conversely, neither this shape nor this motion can exist without this body. Thus love, hatred, affirmation, doubt, and so on are true modes in the mind. But existence, duration, size, number and all universals are not, it seems to me, modes in the strict sense; nor in this sense are justice and mercy, and so on modes in God. They are referred to by a broader term and called attributes, or modes of thinking. . . . Accordingly I say that shape and other similar modes are strictly speaking modally distinct from the substance whose modes they are; but there is a lesser distinction between the other attributes. [. . .] I call it a rational distinction . . . > (1645 or 1646, AT 4:348–49; CSMK 280)

In this passage, Descartes draws a distinction between two senses of the term “mode.” On the one hand, there are modes in the strict sense, such as shape and motion in the case of body, or an act of doubt in the case of the mind. On the other hand, there are modes of thinking, by which he means not modes of mind in the strict sense of acts of thought but ways of thinking about a substance. He indicates that the term “modes,” in this second sense, means the same as “attribute.” With this distinction in hand we can now appreciate what else he is saying in the passage. First, notice that he reaffirms that the attributes of God are merely rationally distinct and offers examples of divine attributes other than will and intellect. Second, he notes that with respect to finite substance, duration, size, number, and all “universals” are merely rationally distinct from their respective substances. So, again, the rational distinction applies not just to a substance’s essence or existence but to all of its attributes. The term “universals” is a bit slippery here, as Descartes draws a distinction between the attributes of a substance—which are merely rationally distinct from it and from each other—and universals properly speaking, which he says in the *Principles* are merely ideas in finite minds. In other words, he wants to reduce the attributes of a substance to the substance itself, outside our thought, whereas he wants to reduce universals (or what one might think of as general attributes considered in abstraction from

all substances outside the mind) to mere ideas.¹³ Third, in the continuation of this letter Descartes reaffirms the identity thesis when he notes that outside our thought the essence and existence of a triangle are “in no way distinct” (AT 4:350, CSMK 280).

Although finite minds and bodies are simple with respect to their attributes, it is important to note that they are not absolutely simple in the way that God is. We observed this point already at the beginning of this subsection: unlike God, created substances are capable of modal variation. It turns out that this sort of complexity is innocuous vis-à-vis the status of universals, but there are other forms of diversity as well. For example, bodies are capable of being divided into spatial parts (AT 7:85, CSM 2:59). In fact, when articulating his physics in the *Principles*, he claims not just that bodies are divisible but that at least some of them are actually divided *ad indefinitum*.¹⁴ Although created minds do not admit of spatial parts, one might think that they manifest another form of complexity. Descartes sometimes speaks of the mind’s various “faculties”—imagination, memory, sensation, and so on. In the *Principles*, he insists that these reduce to two—intellect and will—and that all other so-called faculties are simply different forms of them: “Sensory perception, imagination and pure understanding are simply various modes of perception; desire, aversion, assertion, denial and doubt are various modes of willing” (AT 8–1:17, CSM 1:204). Nevertheless, one might argue that if there are two faculties, the mind is still divisible—not spatially divisible, to be sure, but divisible in some sense. But even if this were correct, it would not matter for our purposes. Despite the simplicity of their attributes, bodies may be complex in one sense and created minds in another, but neither case involves the sort of complexity that would provide fertile ground for a moderate form of realism about universals, whereby universals exist *in* particular created things. It would be absurd to suppose that Descartes regarded the parts of corporeal substances as their metaphysical constituents on the order of genera, species, and other categories of universal recognized by the scholastics. Likewise, created minds might have distinct faculties of intellect and will, but, whatever such faculties amount to, they are not metaphysical constituents that are shared by multiple minds.

To summarize the results of this section, Descartes maintains like other conceptualists that only particular substances exist. His first philosophical intuitions, however, are not about that claim but about which particulars there are—viz.,

13. See Nolan 1998 for further discussion of this point.

14. AT 8–1:59–60, CSM 1:239. Descartes argues that such division is necessary to explain vortical motion in a plenum.

God, the self or one's own mind, and body. His second main intuition is about the nature of these particulars. Following the Platonic or Neoplatonic tradition, he maintains that substances are simple. This simplicity is reflected in his general claim that a substance and each of its attributes are merely rationally distinct, which entails that a substance is numerically identical with each of its attributes, outside of our thought. As a result of this simplicity, there is no room within substances for universals of any kind, neither in God (as ideas or archetypes for creation) nor in created things. Given his central intuition about simplicity, Descartes is compelled to treat universals merely as ideas in finite minds.

5.3. Divine Simplicity Revisited

Contrary to the argument of the previous section, some defenders of Theological Platonism have attempted to reconcile Descartes's strict understanding of divine simplicity with the thesis that creaturely essences reside in God as ideas. My primary aim in this section will be to show why such efforts fail. In the process, we will deepen our understanding of the role that divine simplicity plays in Descartes's philosophy.

There are actually two ways that ideas in God would violate his simplicity, understood in Descartes's strict sense, but so far we have discussed only one of them. First, positing ideas in God presupposes an ontological distinction (and priority) between divine intellect and will. Second, the theory of divine ideas presupposes a multiplicity of ideas or essences in what is supposed to be a perfect unity. Either one of these violations would provide Descartes with a sufficient reason for rejecting the traditional theory of divine ideas. As we have seen, Descartes's formulation of the doctrine of divine simplicity, especially as it appears in his correspondence, is intended to combat the first of these violations. He identifies God's intellect and will and rejects any priority between them, as would be required if there were ideas in his understanding logically prior to his creative activity. Interestingly enough, however, it is the second of these violations that so enthralled the scholastics, many of whom tried to reconcile the theory of divine ideas with the doctrine of divine simplicity. In what follows, I briefly explore this scholastic attempt at reconciliation in order to explain why Descartes cannot accept it. This discussion provides the necessary background for discussing Rozemond's recent defense of Theological Platonism on this issue.

In her magisterial book *William Ockham*, Marilyn Adams provides a useful discussion of what she calls the "Simplicity Problem" in the Middle Ages. Adams notes that early medieval philosophers who endorse the doctrine of exemplary causation, such as Augustine and Anselm, did not confront the problem. They posited discrete ideas or essences in God while also maintaining

that God is perfectly simple, without acknowledging the inconsistency of their position. But most thirteenth- and fourteenth-century scholastics appreciated the force of the problem and attempted to solve it. The standard proposal was that creaturely essences enjoy a *nonreal* mode of existence in the divine understanding. Because their existence is nonreal, they do not violate the simplicity of God's essence, which is fully real (the *ens realissimum*). Adams writes: "The really existent divine essence is one simple thing that involves no real internal complexity. . . . But the activity of the divine intellect produces a possibly infinite plurality of things in some non-real mode of existence. It is this non-real plurality that provides the rationale for speaking of a plurality of ideas" (Adams 1987, 2:1037).

Without evaluating the merits of this proposed solution to the Simplicity Problem, it suffices to observe that Descartes cannot accept it. Since divine intellect and will are the same, ideas in God cannot possibly enjoy a nonreal mode of existence. If God understands them, then he wills or creates them, and, if he creates them, then they have being. In the *Conversation with Burman*, Descartes reportedly says that God cannot "incline to nothingness"; he always tends toward being (AT 5:147, CSMK 334). Among other things, this means that God cannot create something that lacks being.

This might seem like the end of the debate, but in her recent defense of Theological Platonism, Rozemond has attempted to trace Descartes's thought back to Duns Scotus, whose views often deviated from those of other scholastics. Instead of affirming that creaturely essences enjoy a nonreal mode of existence prior to creation, Scotus urges that they possess objective being in God's understanding. Rozemond suggests that this position better befits Descartes's view that creaturely essences are created (Rozemond 2008, 48). As such, these essences must possess some sort of being, even if only attenuated (what the scholastics called *esse diminutum*). In the Third Meditation, Descartes says that objective being is a diminished form of being in comparison with what he calls "formal being" or actual existence outside the mind; nevertheless, it is "not nothing" (AT 7:41, CSM 2:29). Although Descartes's remarks about objective being are confined to human cognition, Rozemond thinks that we can extrapolate from what he says there to account for divine thought. She also notes that according to Scotus the presence of a plurality of objective beings in the divine understanding is consistent with God's simplicity because the beings in question are merely "formally distinct" in his technical sense of that expression (2008, 54–55).

There are at least two problems with this attempt to accommodate divine simplicity within Theological Platonism. First, it lacks direct textual support and is based exclusively on extrapolations from what Descartes says about the role of objective being in *human* cognition. It is not clear how Descartes's statements

concerning the latter, which incidentally are notoriously difficult to interpret, commit him to anything with respect to divine cognition.

Second, and more importantly, Rozemond's proposal does not solve the Simplicity Problem, at least not for Descartes who, again, has a stricter understanding of divine simplicity than perhaps any other Christian philosopher. Objective beings would still have some form of being in God and hence would violate his simplicity. Indeed, many of Scotus's critics have made this very point, most notably Ockham. To understand the problem, we must make a brief excursus into Scotus's metaphysics. Commentators have found Scotus's notion of a formal distinction to be extremely difficult to understand, but one thing is clear: it is something less than a real distinction, which obtains between two things (*res*), and something more than a distinction of reason, which obtain solely in the mind. Since the formal distinction obtains prior to thought, commentators note that it can be called "real" by contrast with the rational distinction. But herein lies the problem for divine simplicity. As Peter King writes in an essay surveying Scotus's metaphysics:

Given that the formal distinction is real in the broad sense, must there not then be some degree of complexity in its subject? The formal distinction holds in reality prior to the operation of the intellect. Even if there are not distinct thinglike property bearers in a subject, then, it nevertheless seems as though no thing to which a formal distinction applies can be simple. This would rule out any formal distinction in God (2003, 24).

Scotus thinks that the formal distinction *is* consistent with divine simplicity, but that is only because he holds an idiosyncratic view of real composition. Scholastic philosophers oppose simplicity to real composition: something is simple if and only if it is not a composite (Adams 1987, 2:903). On Scotus's view, real composition requires that one entity be in potency with respect to another and that the activity of the latter serves to perfect it (see Adams 1987, 2:932–33, and King 2003, 37). King offers the example of a genus (e.g., animal) that is in potency to a differentia (e.g., rationality). Since there is no potency in God, who according to the scholastics is "pure act," the presence of a multiplicity of diverse objective beings in his understanding poses no threat to his simplicity. For Scotus, this solution to the Simplicity Problem is intended to be general, for it also purportedly explains how there can be three persons in one God as according to the doctrine of the Trinity (King 2003, 24).

The relevant point for our purposes is that Scotus can account for divine simplicity only by appealing to an idiosyncratic account of real composition that Descartes would not accept. Descartes rejects the Aristotelian act-potency

distinction. Moreover, it is clear that Scotus has a weak notion of divine simplicity: something is simple if and only if it is not composite in this restricted sense. He is willing to bend the notion of simplicity in a way that Descartes is not because his priorities and philosophical motivations are different. One of his main priorities is to explain God's knowledge of creatures and he thinks this can be done only on the Platonic model by appealing to objective beings in the divine understanding. Descartes would likely say that he is not *unconcerned* to explain divine knowledge, but that one should do so without anthropomorphizing God. Scotus's appeal to objective beings in God does just that. As we saw in section 5.2, Descartes lays stress on the doctrine of divine simplicity, particularly as it applies to the relation between divine intellect and will, largely because he wants to avoid treating God on the model of a human artisan who must look to a blueprint prior to creating. In his view, the latter conception of God diminishes his perfection, which he sees himself as trying to vindicate. This is one of the key points that defenders of Theological Platonism have failed to appreciate.

At one point in her essay, Rozemond tries to solve the Simplicity Problem by saying that for Descartes, unlike Scotus, the objective beings in God's intellect are merely rationally distinct from his essence (2008, 54–55). But as I noted above (and have argued at length elsewhere¹⁵), to say that x and y are merely rationally distinct is to say that they are identical in reality, outside our thought. It is only we, with our finite minds, who draw such a distinction, which obtains solely in our thought. Rozemond concurs with this interpretation, at least on the main point: "And the distinction of reason, for Descartes, is a distinction that does not correspond to a distinction within God" (2008, 55). The problem is that by saying there are objective beings in the divine understanding *and* they are merely rationally distinct, Rozemond is trying to have it both ways: there are discrete creaturely essences in the divine understanding *and* they are *not* discrete. Scotus recognized that he could not consistently affirm both claims, and so adopts the formal distinction. But there is no textual basis for attributing this type of distinction to Descartes.¹⁶ On the contrary, in the *Conversation with Burman*, Descartes reportedly tells his interviewer that "Whatever is in God is not in reality separate from God himself; rather it is identical with God himself

15. See Nolan 1997b and 1998.

16. In the letter cited in passage [6], Descartes says that the rational distinction between essence and existence can be called a formal distinction. However, as the context makes clear, this is only a verbal point. He goes on to say that the rational distinction can also be called a real distinction, which shows that in both cases Descartes is attempting to accommodate the two main rival accounts of the relation between essence and existence within his own as a way of neutralizing them (AT 4:349–50, CSMK 3:280–81). Cf. the First Replies, where Descartes collapses the modal and formal distinctions (AT 7:120–21, CSM 2:86).

(*imo est ipse Deus*)” (AT 5:166, JC 32). This statement serves to confirm the Conceptualist Interpretation and shows why Theological Platonism cannot find a foothold within his system.

In affirming that for Descartes everything in God is merely rationally distinct, including divine intellect and will, Rozemond is forced to acknowledge yet another important difference between him and Scotus:

Descartes firmly rejects the idea that God’s understanding of essences precedes his creative activity. This is clearly a major departure from what we found in Scotus. But this difference does not rule out the possibility that Descartes thought they have objective being in God’s mind. He might hold that God’s understanding/willing/creating the truths gives them objective being in God as a result of efficient causality. (2008, 50)

I take this concession to be fatal to Rozemond’s interpretation. It is not just that the proposed analogy with Scotus is now extremely tenuous. The deeper problem is that by acknowledging Descartes’s view that in God understanding and willing are the same, she is also acknowledging that he lacks any motivation for locating essences in God. Such essences would be philosophically idle or otiose. Recall that the scholastics posited creaturely essences in God to explain his knowledge of finite beings and to show how divine creation is rational. As an interpretation of Descartes, Theological Platonism is motivated in part by just these considerations, especially the former. But, as the scholastics understood, essences can serve these functions only if they are in his intellect logically prior to his will. But if Descartes rejects all such priority, and identifies God’s intellect and will, how can such an account explain God’s knowledge of creation? It could explain how he knows *objective beings*, for those are the ones he understands/wills/creates on Rozemond’s proposal. But what about actually existing substances? Rozemond is forced to that God understands/wills/creates them by a separate act. So that means he understands or knows actually existing creatures by that second act, not the first! The first act and the objective beings it produces are thus otiose. If Rozemond wishes to insist that there is only one divine act, as she should, given the doctrine of divine simplicity and given Descartes’s remark to Burman cited above, then she is committed to the view I defend in the next section, that God understands/wills/creates actually existing substances. In other words, she is committed to reading Descartes as a Divine Direct Realist. That is the dilemma for the Theological Platonist Interpretation: either it posits creaturely essences in God that are metaphysically idle and violate his simplicity or it collapses into the view I favor.

5.4. Divine Knowledge of Creation

The medieval theory of divine ideas was intended to serve multiple functions. In addition to explaining how God creates the world, it was also enlisted to explicate how God knows creation. It delivers what might be termed a representational or indirect realist account of the latter. God knows created substances by knowing himself or, more specifically, by knowing the essences or exemplars that reside in his intellect. As we have seen, Descartes rejects the theory of divine ideas on the grounds that it violates God's supreme simplicity. In fact, I have argued that Descartes formulates the latter doctrine in the way that he does (by identifying divine intellect and will), and draws consequences from it about the dependence of all things on God's will, because he sees himself as rejecting the traditional theory of divine ideas as well as the accounts of exemplary creation and divine knowledge that accompany it.

But if God does not know creatures through ideas then how does he know them? As an omniscient being he must know them in some way and yet Descartes says virtually nothing about this issue. One might be tempted to ascribe this silence to the doctrine of divine incomprehensibility, which he takes very seriously, and leave matters at that. However, Descartes typically invokes divine inscrutability in contexts where God's infinitude or his purposes in creation are at issue. That is not the case here. Moreover, as we have seen, Descartes is quite willing to draw consequences about the nature of God's creation from the doctrine of divine simplicity. What if further consequences followed from this and related doctrines about the nature of God's *knowledge* of creation? In this section, I shall argue that at least one consequence does so follow. Specifically, I claim that Descartes is committed to "Divine Direct Realism": God knows finite substances immediately without the mediation of ideas. Rozemond has urged that Descartes's theory of universal essences be traced to Scotus, but if I am right then it makes more sense to look to Ockham, who was a direct realist about divine cognition and, not coincidentally, a nominalist or conceptualist about universals. Now, admittedly, the assertion that Descartes is a Divine Direct Realist does not have the same status as interpretive claims for which there is explicit textual evidence. But I think we can at least say that Descartes *ought to have* held this view given his other commitments. One virtue of attributing Divine Direct Realism to Descartes is that it explains how God can know a diversity of things without himself being diverse. In other words, it provides an elegant solution to the Simplicity Problem as applied to divine knowledge: the objects of God's knowledge are complex, but the divine essence remains perfectly simple.

Here then are two simple and straightforward arguments for this interpretation. These are “Cartesian” arguments in the sense that the premises are drawn from Descartes’s philosophical commitments.

Argument I

- (1) In God, willing and understanding are the same.
- (2) Therefore, *what* he wills and understands are the same.
- (3) What he wills or creates are actually existing substances (what Descartes sometimes calls “existing essences”; see passage [8] below).
- (4) Therefore, what he understands or knows are actually existing substances.

The first premise is a statement of Descartes’s version of the doctrine of divine simplicity (see passages [2]–[4] above). Premise (3) is a piece of Christian doctrine that Descartes clearly accepts. The conclusion in step (4) is asserting that the immediate objects of divine cognition are created substances themselves, not ideational proxies. I have saved step (2) for last, since it is the hinge upon which the whole argument turns. What is being claimed is that the *objects* of God’s will and understanding are the same. Descartes clearly takes the inference from (1) to (2) to be valid, for he draws the same inference when he derives the doctrine of the creation of the eternal truths from divine simplicity. According to his reasoning, if divine intellect and will are the same, then there is nothing in his intellect (such as ideas) prior to his will. Whatever he understands he wills and vice versa. Thus, absolutely everything depends on God’s will, including creaturely essences and the eternal truths concerning them.

The other argument for Divine Direct Realism can be formulated as an argument from elimination.

Argument II

- (1) God knows creaturely essences either
 - (a) indirectly, by knowing himself, or
 - (b) directly, by knowing created substances themselves.
- (2) Not (1a).
- (3) Therefore (1b).

Let us take each premise in turn. One common objection to arguments from elimination is that the enumeration of possible alternatives is not exhaustive. In this case, however, the first premise is stated very generally, such that the two options are jointly exhaustive (and mutually exclusive): God knows creaturely essences either directly or indirectly. Premise (1a) is also stated broadly so that it is consistent

with different versions of Theological Platonism. God might know creatures on this view by having ideas of them in his understanding (Rozemond 2008) or by knowing his volitions (Schmaltz 1991). We have already spent much of this chapter considering the main grounds for accepting premise (2), namely, Descartes's strict conception of divine simplicity, which precludes the presence of multiple ideas or volitions in God or a distinction between divine will and understanding, as such a theory of divine knowledge would require. There are two further supporting reasons for premise (2) that I discuss in what follows. I also consider and reject objections to these reasons from advocates of Theological Platonism.

First, given his view that the essences of finite beings are created, Descartes cannot countenance creaturely essences in God on pain of heresy. Recall that Descartes maintains that whatever is in God is identical with him, but God cannot be identical with (part of) creation. I noted this problem in my original paper on this topic (see Nolan 1997a, 188n13). Rozemond and Schmaltz have both tried to address it by distinguishing divine *causation* of essences and eternal truths from divine *creation* of existing things. According to them, Descartes draws a distinction like this in the May 1630 letter to Mersenne (from passage [4]):

[7] You ask what God did in order to produce them [i.e., the eternal truths]. I reply that <from eternity he willed and understood them to be, and by that very fact he created them>. Or, if you reserve the word <created> for the existence of things, then he <established them and made them>. (AT 1:152–3, CSMK 25)

To explain and further support this distinction, Rozemond and Schmaltz appeal to the fact that Descartes sometimes suggests that eternal truths are not actual existents and thus not produced by God in the same way as finite substances (Rozemond 2008, 50, 56; Schmaltz 2002, 83–84). In the Sixth Replies, for example, Descartes compares the eternal truths to the laws produced by a king and says that such laws do not actually exist but are “moral entities” (*ens morale*) (AT 7:436, CSM 2:294).¹⁷ The proposed solution to the heresy problem is thus that eternal truths and essences—although caused by God—are not creatures in the same sense as finite minds and bodies. So there is no heresy involved in the claim that they reside in God *qua* objective beings.

I have two rejoinders. First, I suggest that Descartes makes this point about eternal truths being “established” and “made” rather than “created” only to satisfy

17. Cf. earlier remarks to Mersenne in 1630 (AT 1:145, CSMK 3:23). The talk of a “moral entity” lends itself to multiple interpretations and thus, in my opinion, cannot be used to adjudicate the debate.

Mersenne. Note that he says “if *you* reserve the word <created> for the existence of things.” Mersenne might have been shocked by the claim that the eternal truths are created, given the skeptical consequences it seems to have and the lack of precedent in the history of Christian thought. Descartes is best read as trying to soften the blow. So this is merely a rhetorical point. Descartes is not really committed to any robust distinction between two kinds of divine causation, which might itself violate God’s simplicity. This suggestion is confirmed by the first sentence of the letter, where Descartes writes: “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 1:151–2; CSMK 25). Descartes could not be clearer about his view here. Rather than distinguishing two kinds of divine causation, he insists that God creates the eternal truths by the same kind of causality that he created all things. It strains credulity to believe that he would begin the letter with this unqualified statement and then, in the very next paragraph, draw anything more than a nominal distinction between the creation of the eternal truths and the creation of existing substances.

Second, even if creaturely essences were to have an attenuated form of being in God as objective beings, they would still be “not nothing,” as Descartes says in the Third Meditation concerning the objective being of human ideas. So to say that God causes, rather than creates, eternal truths seems to be splitting hairs or engaging in a verbal dispute—something Descartes abhorred. The upshot is that if Descartes held that God produces them in his intellect by an act of will, then he would be guilty of heresy.

A second piece of evidence for premise (2) of Argument II derives from Descartes’s account of the essence-existence distinction. If the essences of finite beings were in God’s intellect prior to creation, then there would be a distinction *in reality* (i.e., either a real or modal distinction in Descartes’s senses) between the essence and existence of an actually existing created substance. This is so because essences would have some form of (eternal) being prior to the actually existing things in which they were instantiated; indeed, some scholastics spoke here of *esse essentiae*. But as we observed in section 5.2, Descartes maintains that there is merely a distinction of reason between essence and existence in all things.¹⁸ Thus, there can be no essences in God’s intellect prior to his will.

Rozemond anticipates an argument like this and questions its soundness on the following grounds: the scholastics treat the following as separate issues: (1) the nature of the distinction between essence and existence within the created world, and (2) the status of creaturely essences in God as knower and creator. She then

18. See esp. passage [6].

claims that in the passages from the *Principles* in which Descartes treats universals as ideas he is concerned with the first of these topics and *not* the second (2008, 58).¹⁹ According to her, he simply means to deny that universal essences are distinct entities in the objects to which we attribute them. But this position, she argues, has no philosophical import for the status of essences in God. “Even if Descartes thinks there is only a distinction of reason in the created world between the thing and the universal, that leaves open the possibility that essences have objective being in God’s mind” (2008, 59).

Let me begin by agreeing with one part of Rozemond’s claim. It is true that the scholastics treat claims (1) and (2) as separate philosophical issues, and the reason they do so is because these issues are motivated by different problems. As we have noted, the scholastics posit ideas or essences in God, prior to creation, in order to show that creation is intelligible and rational, and to explain God’s knowledge of creatures. But they draw a distinction between essence and existence in order to mark the theological divide between God (the sole infinite being) and finite, created beings. Traditionally, Christian philosophers mark this divide by distinguishing God’s supreme simplicity from the composite nature of finite beings. As noted in section 5.2, the scholastics countenance various forms of composition, but foremost among them is the distinction between matter and form. However, some thinkers such as Aquinas reject the doctrine of universal hylomorphism (according to which *all* finite substances are composites of matter and form), for what is one to say about the case of purely spiritual substances such as angels, which lack matter? The distinction between essence and existence is thus enlisted to provide another form of composition to account for the contingent and finite nature of creatures.²⁰

Although there are two separate issues here, motivated by different problems, Rozemond is wrong to conclude from this fact that these issues are not related or that the position a philosopher stakes out on one does not have consequences for the other. If one affirms a distinction in reality between essence and existence, then one can—without contradiction—posit creaturely essences in God prior to existence. There are multiple ways of drawing such a distinction: for example, Aquinas and others, like Giles of Rome, affirmed a real distinction between essence and existence; Scotus and his followers drew a formal distinction; and so on. The important case, however, is the distinction of reason. If one affirms this type of distinction then one cannot, on pain of contradiction, posit creaturely essences in God. To understand why this is so, we must turn to Francisco Suárez,

19. The main passage in question is at AT 8–1:27–8, CSM 1:210.

20. See Wippel 1982a and 1982b.

the late scholastic thinker who seems to have influenced Descartes's theory of distinctions.

Like Descartes, Suárez argues that there is merely a distinction of reason between essence and existence in all things and devotes a lengthy disputation to this doctrine as applied to finite beings. One of his first moves is to establish the following principle, which he sees as providing the necessary groundwork for the doctrine of rational distinction: prior to being created by God, the essences of finite beings are absolutely nothing. Suárez writes: "the essence of a creature, or the creature of itself, and before it is made by God, has in itself no true real being and in this precise sense of existential being, the essence is not some reality, but it is absolutely nothing" (*omnino nihil*) (1983, 57). Let us call this the *Omnino Nihil* Principle. As translator Norman Wells argues in his commentary on this disputation, Suárez defends this principle as a way of dispensing with the two competing traditions on the relation between essence and existence, as found in the Thomists and the Scotists, who again posit a real and formal distinction, respectively (Suárez 1983, Introduction, 7–10). Both of these other traditions take it as a premise that, prior to God exercising his efficient causality, the essence of a creature is a *res* or thing in its own right and even enjoys some form of eternal being (*esse essentiae*) in God. They also assume that these essences serve as exemplars for divine creation.²¹ By arguing that essences are *omnino nihil* prior to creation, Suárez sees himself as depriving these traditional accounts of their foundation. He understands that there is a deep connection between the status of essences prior to creation and the nature of the essence-existence relation in finite beings. In particular, he recognizes that he can establish that essence and existence are identical, or merely rationally distinct, in finite beings only by first showing that creaturely essences are *omnino nihil* prior to God's creative activity. Wells writes: "with the alleged eternal essences of his adversaries reduced from a *res* to a *nihil*, there is no longer any sound basis for [a real or formal distinction] to bedarken future discussions of essence and existence. In principle, with this despatching of the creature's essence as an actual eternal *res*, the identity between an actual essence and its actual existence is secured" (Suárez 1983, Introduction, 10).

21. Wells writes: "However cast, the prevailing feature [of the general position that there is a distinction of reality between essence and existence] is that of an essence which in and of itself enjoys a being or reality apart from any creative efficient causality of God. So much is this the case that essences continue to perdure, though the actual things which embody them have ceased to exist. In this light, the essences of finite beings, unlike their existence, are eternal, necessary and uncaused by an efficient cause." Wells notes that it is a very short step from this premise to the conclusion that there is a real or formal distinction between essence and existence in creatures (Suárez 1983, 8).

Contrary to Rozemond, at least one scholastic philosopher held that the status of essences prior to creation and the essence-existence distinction are intimately related. And among scholastic philosophers, Suárez was of particular importance to Descartes. As Étienne Gilson (1979) proposes, he is the likely source of Descartes's theory of distinctions. Descartes even endorses Suárez's *Omnino Nihil* Principle. In his *Conversation with Burman*, Descartes's youthful interviewer asks him whether essence is prior to existence and whether in creating things God "merely gave them existence." Descartes reportedly replies:

[8] We are right to separate the two in our thought, for we can conceive of essence without actual existence, as in the case of a rose in winter. However, the two cannot be separated in reality in accordance with the customary distinction; for *there was no essence prior to existence*, since existence is merely existing essence. So one is really not prior to the other, nor are they separate or distinct. (AT 5:164, JC 24, emphasis added)

Here, Descartes not only claims that "there was no essence prior to existence," thus endorsing the *Omnino Nihil* Principle, but he also underscores the inferential link between this issue and the essence-existence relation. Given this principle, essence and existence can be separated in thought, but not in reality according to the "customary distinction." In reality, there is no distinction; "existence is merely existing essence." By "customary distinction," he likely means a real distinction, which was favored by the Thomists, but whatever the case he clearly intends to contrast a distinction in reality with a distinction in thought (or reason), and to endorse the latter on the grounds that there was no essence prior to actual existence.

5.5. General Objections to the Conceptualist Interpretation and Replies

I turn now to two general objections to the Conceptualist Interpretation. The main objection is that it cannot account for the sense in which Cartesian essences are, in Descartes's words, "immutable and eternal" (AT 7:64, CSM 2:45). The conceptualist reading asserts that Cartesian essences, insofar as they are distinguished from actually existing substances, are nothing more than the objective being of innate ideas in finite minds. But although they are immortal, finite minds are not eternal and their existence does not extend even to the beginning of time. They are also highly mutable. One is not always thinking about the

essences of God, mind, body, or geometrical figures, and one's thought moves frequently from idea to another.

In my original paper on this topic (Nolan 1997a), I offered a complex and multifaceted response to this objection, but critics focused on my ancillary remarks and overlooked the main point. So I begin by restating it in a different way. According to divine voluntarism, which Descartes endorses, God creates all finite things, including essences and the eternal truths concerning them. Thus, even before we ask about the ontological status of these essences, we can ask a prior question: how can anything created be eternal? Created things have a beginning in time. Indeed, it is an article of Christian faith that God created the world in time.²² Thus, so-called eternal truths might have an everlasting existence in the future but not in the past. As for the immutability of such truths, if God created them then it would seem that he could also change them. Descartes himself confronts this issue directly in an early letter to Mersenne where he debates an imaginary interlocutor (the latter's remarks are in quotation marks):

[9] It will be said that if God had established these [mathematical] truths he could change them as a king changes his laws. To this the answer is: Yes he can, if his will can change. "But I understand them to be eternal and unchangeable."—I make the same judgment about God. "But his will is free."—Yes, but his power is beyond our grasp. In general we can assert that God can do everything that is within our grasp but not that he cannot do what is beyond our grasp. It would be rash to think that our imagination reaches as far as his power. (April 15, 1630; AT 1:145–46; CSMK 23)

Descartes does not assert positively that God could change the eternal truths. But he also does not deny it. His position here, as in some other statements of the creation doctrine, is nuanced and cautious. Given the innate ideas that God has

22. Descartes sometimes distinguishes creation "from eternity" (or "from all eternity") and creation "in time." In the Sixth Replies, he says that God creates the world in time but created the eternal truths from eternity (AT 7:432–36, CSM 2:291–94). The claim that God creates the eternal truths "from all eternity" appears in the correspondence as well (AT 1:152, CSMK 25). But one must be cautious in drawing any substantive conclusions from this distinction, for elsewhere in the correspondence Descartes says that God wills the thoughts that enter a person's mind "from all eternity" and also decides from eternity which of our prayers he will answer (AT 4:314, CSMK 272; AT 4:316, CSMK 273). In these contexts at least, saying that something is willed from eternity makes a claim not about the temporal status of the thing willed but about the nature of God's will, namely that it is indifferent and inalterable (for the latter attribute, see AT 5:166, CSMK 348). This is only a conjecture, but Descartes may have wished to affirm that God creates *all* things from eternity (in the sense just explained), but feared that doing so would give the appearance that he rejects the Christian doctrine that the world has a beginning.

implanted in us, we cannot conceive of the eternal truths as being other than they are. However, given what we know about God's omnipotence, nothing is beyond his power. So, as he says elsewhere, we should "not dare to say that God cannot" alter the eternal truths (AT 5:224, CSMK 358–59). This doubly negative statement does not assert a positive modal claim to the effect that God *could* change the eternal truths.²³ But it does not rule out this possibility, or so it has seemed to many readers, and that is the source of the problem concerning the immutability.

My main reply to the objection, then, is that the problem of explaining how Cartesian essences can be eternal and immutable has its source in Descartes's doctrine that the eternal truths are created. The problem arises independently of the Conceptualist Interpretation, which does not raise any new problems. Defenders of Theological Platonism might acknowledge this point but still try to claim as an advantage of their view that it solves the problem: if essences are in God then there is a straightforward sense in which they have these properties, a sense that is parasitic on God's own immutability and eternity. As the arguments in the previous sections of this chapter show, however, this proposal comes at a very steep price for it violates Descartes's strict understanding of divine simplicity and saddles him with heresy. A solution that Descartes could accept only on these terms is no solution at all.

This concludes the main part of my reply to this objection. What I say in what follows is secondary to that. Given the remarks above, it turns out that the defender of conceptualism is not under any special obligation to provide a solution to this difficulty. Nevertheless, I would like to propose one. In my original paper on this topic I offered a deflationary account of the sense in which Cartesian essences are "immutable." In what follows I review that account, to which I remain committed, and then show how a similar account can be offered of their eternity. When Descartes first presents his theory of "true and immutable natures, essences, or forms" in the Fifth Meditation, he draws a sharp contrast between them and invented ideas (or invented natures.). He claims to know, for example, that the essence of a triangle is "not invented by me or dependent on my mind" but "true and immutable" because

[10] various properties can be demonstrated of [it], for example that its three angles equal two right angles, that its greatest side subtends its greatest angle, and the like; and since these properties are ones which I now clearly recognize whether I want to or not [*velim nolim*], even if I never thought of them at all when I previously imagined the triangle, it follows that they cannot have been invented by me. (AT 7:64, CSM 2:45)

23. I owe this insight to Nelson and Cuning 1999.

In further elucidations of this issue in the First Replies, Descartes affirms that invented ideas are composed by us. Like his empiricist contemporaries, he holds a compositional theory of fictitious ideas. Because such ideas are composed by us, they depend on our mind for their content. If, for example, I decide to fashion an idea of a fictitious beast it is up to me to determine how many heads it has, whether it breathes fire, can fly, and so on. By contrast, the content of innate (or “true and immutable”) ideas imposes itself on my thought. Because the latter were created by God, and not by me, I am compelled to think of them in certain prescribed ways (*velim nolim*, as he says above). This is not to say that I must ever attend to these ideas. On the contrary, I can think of them at will, but I cannot alter them at will (AT 7:64, CSM 2:44–45). They are incorruptible by my thought. These remarks complement Descartes’s claim at the end of the causal argument for God’s existence in the Third Meditation, where he says that he knows that his idea of God is innate and not invented because he cannot “add” anything to it or “subtract” anything from it (AT 7:51, CSM 2:35). This then is the sense in which Cartesian essences, qua innate ideas, are immutable.

Defenders of Theological Platonism insist that we should understand the eternity of Cartesian essences and truths in a strict and very literal sense. But Descartes never says anything that requires this. On the contrary, given the problem posed by the creation doctrine, it seems impossible for him to understand the eternity of essences in any but a deflationary sense. As creatures distinct from God, they cannot be eternal either in the everlasting sense (*sempiternity*) nor in the timeless sense that one associates with medieval accounts of God and to which Descartes most likely subscribed. Eternity in the strict sense is an attribute exclusive to God. Moreover, as I argued above, the texts suggest very clearly that Cartesian essences are *immutable* in a deflationary sense. If that is so, then it seems likely that he also conceived their *eternity* in a deflationary sense. In my original paper on this topic, I argued that Descartes employs Platonic language in the Fifth Meditation when he speaks of “true and immutable natures” and the “determinate nature, essence, or form of the triangle” because he sees himself as transplanting essences from Plato’s third realm to the minds of human beings (Nolan 1997a, 184; AT 7:64, CSM 2:44–45). If this is correct, then what I am claiming in effect is that Descartes *reduces* Platonic essences to mind-dependent entities. Thus, it should not be surprising that he also has a reductive analysis of the sense in which they are immutable and eternal.

Jonathan Bennett (1994, 663–65) has claimed that Cartesian truths are eternal in the same sense that they are immutable—namely, they are unchanging. Chappell (1997, 126) also endorses this view. While I think this suggestion moves in the right direction, it is not quite right. As we have seen, Descartes conceives the immutability of essences in terms of the fact that they, unlike invented natures,

cannot be altered by our thought. Their content is causally independent from our mind. That is saying something more than merely that they are “unchanging.” But the property of being eternal is akin to being “unchanging.” A more precise way of putting it would be to say that whenever we are clearly and distinctly perceiving a created essence, such as that of a triangle, we always perceive it as having the same properties. That is not to say that we can never discover new properties in our idea of it. Rather, it means that once having discovered some property, for example, having angles equal to two right angles, we cannot exclude that property from it in our thought, at least not clearly and distinctly. Descartes provides very strong evidence for this reading in the Sixth Replies: “you cannot deny that many truths can be demonstrated of these essences; and since they are always the same, it is right to call them immutable and eternal” (AT 7:381, CSM 2:262).

It is interesting to note that one of Descartes’s followers, Pierre-Sylvain Régis, articulates a view like this. Régis’s remarks are telling because, although he has a different conception of the nature of finite substance, he is one of the few Cartesians who subscribed to the doctrine of the creation of the eternal truths. But Régis explicitly denies that the so-called eternal truths are eternal in any strict or literal sense and suggests that the immutability of these truths admits of a reductive analysis.

[11] It remains therefore that the numerical, geometrical, and metaphysical truths are not at all eternal, but only that they are immutable, since substances can always be compared with one another, and that God willed that all souls be determined to conceive the same thing when they compared them in the same manner. He willed, for example, that they be determined to conceive this *two*, when they compared one unit with another unit; that they be determined to conceive a *triangle*, when they consider extension as bounded by three sides; and finally, that they be determined to conceive a *cause*, when they consider a subject as produced by another. This shows that the immutability itself of the so-called eternal truths is not absolute but dependent. (Régis 1690, 1:179–80; trans. Patricia Easton)

As Patricia Easton writes of this passage: “Thus, on Régis’s account, the important feature of the eternal truths is their *immutability* and the consequence that they are always *conceived by the soul in the same way*. The so-called eternity of truths is derived from the fact that the soul is determined to conceive the *same* truths, so that in this sense, though not eternal in themselves, these truths are *forever* the same” (2009, 354). Descartes, then, was not the only Cartesian who saw the need to offer a deflationary account of the eternity and immutability of

AQ: Please note that the Title of the reference in the Bibliography is different from above. Please advice. Reference appears in BIB as “Régis, Pierre-Sylvain. 1690. *Système de philosophie, contenant la logique, la métaphysique, la physique, et la morale*. 2 vols. in 4. Paris: Thierry.” (p. 43)

AQ: A I can't add it to the bibliography since none is attached to this file. But here is the reference: Régis, Pierre-Sylvain. *Système General selon les principes de M. Descartes*. Paris, 1690. ED: Reference already in bibliography.

truths created by God. I have argued that it is precisely because they are created that Descartes conceived of them in this way.

In recent years, Schmaltz has raised a new objection to the Conceptualist Interpretation pertaining to the nature of God. The objection is that, if true, the interpretation must be restricted to finite essences on the grounds that God's essence is identical with his existence and thus cannot be merely an innate idea in the human mind:

Descartes wanted to set God's essence apart from the other created essences . . . Given the ontological argument the divine essence cannot be identified with any feature of our mind, however enduring or innate. The indication in Descartes is that this external essence is, in fact, identical to the supremely perfect being that exists external to our mind. (Schmaltz 2002, 85)²⁴

There is a straightforward answer to this objection. Given Descartes's view that there is a rational distinction between essence and existence in all things, the term "essence" is systematically ambiguous.²⁵ Sometimes this term is intended to mean an actually existing substance (sense 1), but at other times it means an idea in the human mind (sense 2). This dual usage can be found at various places in Descartes's writings. For example, in passage [8], cited above, Descartes employs both senses of the term "essence" in the course of three sentences. He says that we are right to separate essence and existence in our thought

for we can conceive of essence without actual existence, as in the case of a rose in winter. However, the two cannot be separated in reality in accordance with the customary distinction; for *there was no essence prior to existence*, since existence is merely existing essence. So one is really not prior to the other, nor are they separate or distinct. (AT 5:164, JC 24; emphasis added)

In the first line quoted here, Descartes uses the term "essence" in sense 2, since we are conceiving of the rose in abstraction from its existence, but when he speaks toward the end of the passage of "existing essence," the term "essence" clearly means an actually existing substance (sense 1). This double meaning of the term

24. Cf. Schmaltz 2014, 209.

25. The expression 'systematically ambiguous' recalls Bertrand Russell, but I am using it solely in the sense indicated here.

“essence” is not confined to finite substances. According to Descartes’s ontological argument, we cannot *separate* or *exclude* necessary existence from our clear and distinct idea of God, but we can regard God’s essence in *abstraction* from his existence, just as we can in the case of finite substances. One of the places where Descartes acknowledges the latter point is in passage [6]. Having noted that all of the divine attributes are merely rationally distinct, Descartes adds, “because we do indeed understand the essence of a thing in one way when we consider it in abstraction from whether it exists or not, and in a different way when we consider it as existing; but the thing itself cannot be outside our thought without its existence” (AT 4:349, CSMK 280). Here too the term “essence” is used in the two different senses distinguished above. We can consider God’s essence in abstraction from his existence, in which case we are regarding an idea, or we can consider it as existing, that is, as it is outside our thought. Contrary to Schmalz, it is consistent with Descartes’s claim that in reality God’s essence *just is* his existence that we are able to distinguish the divine essence from existence in our thought. In fact, that is what it means to say that they are merely rationally distinct.

One final point on this topic: when scholastics philosophers drew a distinction between essence and existence, they followed up by asking about the status of the essence that is so distinguished. The Conceptualist Interpretation is making a claim about that status. Here, then, is a way of formulating the interpretation that clarifies the relevant ontological issue: all essences, *insofar as they are distinguished from actually existing substances*, are merely ideas in finite minds.

5.6. Conclusion

In previous work on the ontological status of Cartesian universals, I argued that Descartes is a conceptualist who locates essences in the minds of human beings as innate, intellectual ideas (Nolan 1997a). I also offered a reconstruction of his general theory of universals (the details of which are only partially articulated in the few short texts devoted to this topic) and revealed it to be a corollary to his theory of attributes (Nolan 1997b and 1998). I developed a new defense of this interpretation in this chapter by locating the source of Descartes’s conceptualism in his view that all substances—both created and divine—are simple. As a result of this simplicity, there is no room in the created world for universals as shared properties. There is also no place for universal essences or eternal truths within God.

The latter point raises an important question about the nature of God’s knowledge of creation. Many medieval philosophers held that God knows creaturely essences by knowing ideas in his understanding, and that he uses these ideas as exemplars for creation. But I have shown that Descartes formulates the

doctrine of divine simplicity in the way that he does—by identifying God’s intellect and will—because he sees himself as rejecting these traditional accounts of divine knowledge and creation, which in his view anthropomorphize God. The doctrine of divine simplicity, together with a few other central doctrines, commit Descartes to what I call Divine Direct Realism: God knows creaturely essences by knowing created substances themselves, without the mediation of ideational archetypes in his intellect. Unlike the traditional theory of God’s knowledge, Divine Direct Realism complements Descartes’s conceptualism concerning the status of universals.²⁶ This chapter has also afforded the opportunity to answer objections to the Conceptualist Interpretation and to identify failings of rival Platonist readings.

Abbreviations

AT = Descartes 1964–74; cited by volume and page.

CSM = Descartes 1984–85; cited by volume and page.

CSMK = Descartes 1991; cited by page.

JC = Descartes 1976; cited by page.

26. I am grateful to several people for their suggestions on previous drafts of this chapter, most notably Stefano Di Bella, Nicholas Jolley, Cathay Liu, Alan Nelson, and Al Spangler. I also thank Tad Schmaltz for many lively exchanges over the years, including at the conference on “The Problem of Universals in Modern Philosophy” (Scuola Normale Superiore, Pisa, Italy, November 7–9, 2011), where he was the commentator. The many participants at that conference are owed a debt, including Don Baxter, Stefano Di Bella, Antonia LoLordo, Sam Newlands, Mariangela Priarolo, and Tom Stoneham. In addition, I received helpful feedback at the conference on “Theories of Ideas in Early Modern Philosophy” (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, May 13–15, 2011), especially from Patrick Connolly, Cathay Liu, Alan Nelson, Lex Newman, David Owen, Raffaella De Rosa, and Martha Brandt Bolton.