

Descartes on the Ground of Necessity

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Descartes' views on modality are among the most discussed by his commentators in the past decades. A significant part of this discussion concerns Descartes' *grounding thesis*. This is Descartes' thesis that logical possibility and necessity are grounded in God's volition. According to Descartes, the dependence of modality on God's free will entails that God could have made contradictions true. This is, in a nutshell, Descartes' doctrine of the creation of eternal truths. On the seemingly harmless assumption that some state of affairs ϕ can be brought about if and only if ϕ is logically possible, the claim that God could have made contradictions true seems to entail the logical possibility of the logically impossible. Unsurprisingly, Descartes' doctrine has been called 'strange' (Jolley, 1990:32), 'incoherent' (Geach, 1973:10), and 'absurd' (Conant, 1992:163). In this paper, I will offer an interpretation of Descartes' doctrine that is neither incoherent nor absurd. I will argue that the word 'could' is equivocal in Descartes' creation doctrine. It can be understood either logically, as in the assertion that God made it the case that contradictories *could* not be true together. Or it can be understood in relation to God's will itself, as in the assertion that God *could* have made contradictions true. Not only does this interpretation solve the difficulties that the creation doctrine is usually thought to generate, but it is also better integrated into the core of Descartes' metaphysical and theological views than any of the alternatives.

Bibliography

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