

# Divine Deception in Descartes' *Meditations*

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## 1. The Deceiving God and the Free Creation of Eternal Truths

**The following well-known passage** from Descartes' First Meditation introduces the concept of metaphysical doubt:

And yet firmly rooted in my mind is the long-standing opinion that there is an omnipotent God who made me the kind of creature that I am. How do I know that he has not brought it about that there is no earth, no sky, no extended thing, no shape, no size, no place, while at the same time ensuring that all these things appear to me to exist just as they do now? What is more, since I sometimes believe that others go astray in cases where they think they have the most perfect knowledge, may I not similarly go wrong every time I add two and three or count the sides of a square, or in some even simpler matter, if that is imaginable?<sup>1</sup>

The entire *Meditations on First Philosophy* is dedicated to demolishing this doubt, which presents the largest threat to scientific authority. Descartes refers to metaphysical doubt in order to bring into question the truth of simple propositions of mathematics. However, what does it mean for Descartes to suggest that I could deceive myself “every time I add two and three,” given that it is inconceivable for me that two added to three is not five?

Interpreters often explain doubts concerning mathematical propositions and, more generally, sentences the negation of which imply a clear contradiction<sup>2</sup> by referring to the Cartesian doctrine of the free creation of eternal truths. According to this doctrine, God could have established true propositions that were clearly contradictory.<sup>3</sup> On this view, God could have made the human mind capable of conceiving that God could have established that two added to three is not five, while at the same

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time making it inconceivable that two added to three is anything but five—a condition that seems to perfectly fit the idea of doubting the truth of a proposition whose opposite is inconceivable. This condition provides additional grounds for citing the doctrine of the free creation of eternal truths as an explanation for the hyperbolic doubt of the First Meditation. In fact, it offers a clear interpretive key for distinguishing a psychological inability to doubt from a metaphysical inability to doubt: even when it is impossible to conceive of the opposite of a proposition, God could have established its falsity. An explanation for the possibility of hyperbolic doubt made through an appeal to the doctrine of the free creation of eternal truths, which would maintain that anything can be doubted—even things that look evident when actually inspected—, is thus particularly well suited for interpretations that refute any intersection between psychological and metaphysical doubt.<sup>4</sup>

One should admit that from the outset of the deceiving God hypothesis, there are compelling grounds to introduce God as a free creator of eternal truths. In fact, the Cartesian doctrine of the free creation of eternal truths claims that God has absolute power in the constitution of truth and, particularly, in the establishment of those truths whose opposites imply their own contradiction. The recurrent, if not **exclusively** Cartesian example of this kind of proposition consists in mathematical truths: in a celebrated letter to Marin Mersenne, dated April 15, 1630, Descartes first articulates the doctrine, stating that “mathematical truths . . . have been laid down by God and depend on him entirely no less than the rest of his creatures” (CSMK 23; AT I 145). In a following letter to Mersenne, dated May 6, 1630, Descartes reaffirms the doctrine’s relationship to “mathematical truths” (CSMK 25; AT I 150), and then, in a letter dated May 27, 1630, Descartes adapts the first example of these truths from Thomas Aquinas (CSMK 25; AT I 152). Addressing the issue of geometrical truth, Descartes writes, “[God] was free to make it not true that all the radii of the circle are equal—just as free as he was not to create the world” (ibid.).<sup>5</sup>

The first object of God’s free creation is mathematical truths, and the doubt provoked by the omnipotent God in the First Meditation is also raised with reference to simple propositions of mathematics, hence the example of the addition of two and three and the enumeration of the sides of a square. We must first see, then, if the dependency of mathematical truths on divine power warrants any doubt regarding these truths; and second, we must see if this doubt corresponds to, or is exhausted by, the doubt generated by the deceiving God in the First Meditation. Descartes’ response to the first issue can be found in the first formulation of his thesis on the dependency of mathematical truths on divine power. In fact, in his letter to Mersenne from April 15, 1630, Descartes places himself in the position of the reader, discussing

the possibility that God could have established as true the opposite of that which appears to us as necessarily true (CSMK 23; AT I 145–6). In a fictional dialogue, he preemptively refutes the objection that the reader would have surely raised: if God had freely established eternal truths, God could also change them. For Descartes then, it was clear that, first, his innovative theory could generate doubt concerning the necessarily true propositions, and second, that this doubt, from the Cartesian perspective, concerned the *permanence* of truth. Moreover, Descartes immediately rejects this doubt: given that God is immutable, these truths, once established as immutable, cannot be altered.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the need to reject doubt about the permanence of truth already appears to be an admission of the legitimacy of such doubt. There is, therefore, at least some kind of doubt concerning truth that is plausible within the theory of the free creation of eternal truths. We must now consider whether this is the doubt Descartes raises with the hypothesis of divine deception in the First Meditation, and additionally, whether the doubt in the First Meditation is conceivable solely through the doctrine of the dependency of truth on the free act of divine creation.

## 2. The Order of the *Meditations*

A reading of doubt in the First Meditation in light of a theory of the free creation of eternal truths must address at least two problems. The first problem is the absence of such a theory within the *Meditations*, an absence that cannot be explained in terms of causal reasons, given the vehement clarity with which Descartes formulates this theory when responding to the sixth set of objections (CSM II 293–4; AT VII 435–6), and also when replying to Gassendi (CSM II 261; AT VII 380). The second problem is that the very strategy of the *Meditations*, which is particularly evident in the First Meditation, problematizes the use of the doctrine that Descartes formulates explicitly in contrast to all preceding theological traditions. This latter case presents the greatest obstacle for explaining the nature of the doubt generated by the omnipotent God in the appeal to the free creation of eternal truths.

Interpreters who to some extent rely on the doctrine of the free creation of eternal truths in order to understand the nature and focus of doubt in mathematics in the First Meditation, implicitly presuppose that a “naïve” reading of the First Meditation and of the *Meditations* in general—that is, an ignorant reading of Cartesian physics and metaphysics—is destined to fail. And furthermore, these readers argue that in order to understand the *Meditations* it is necessary to understand all of Cartesian thought, including doctrines such as the doctrine on the free creation of eternal truths, even though these doctrines had not yet been

published at the time Descartes was writing the *Meditations*. Actually, the question concerning the problem of the presence or absence of the doctrine of the free creation of eternal truths within the First Meditation may be stated in this way: how necessary is it to know the whole of Descartes' *œuvre* to understand the *Meditations*? If we take seriously what Descartes himself says concerning the structure of the *Meditations*, the response should be that this knowledge is not necessary at all. Descartes composed meditations, not a treatise, in order to make this new philosophy emerge from established knowledge and from common prejudices. The new philosophy must be achieved gradually, by slowly ridding oneself of the prejudices that initially completely possess the mind of whomever decides to fully embrace the path of liberation. Cartesian physics and metaphysics provide a landing point; they are not a prerequisite for the meditative process. Descartes tells Marin Mersenne in a letter dated January 28, 1641, that the *Meditations* contain "all of the fundamentals of my physics," but these should not be immediately revealed to readers entrenched in Aristotelian prejudices because, in this way, they will "gradually get used to my principles . . . before they notice that they destroy the principles of Aristotle" (CSMK 23; AT III 297–8). The *Meditations* are intended to guide the reader to an understanding of Cartesian physics without the reader needing to preemptively renounce Aristotelianism but instead by helping the reader see this physics emerge through gradual modification and abandonment of opposing assumptions. The protagonist of the meditative exercise must modify himself internally, beginning with his own cultural knowledge; and the reader, in line with Descartes' intentions, must completely become one with that protagonist: "I would not urge anyone to read this book except those who are able and willing to meditate seriously with me" (CSM II 8; AT VII 9).

If we take seriously what the literary form of a meditation implies, then this should convince us that the "order of reasons" or the "analytical order" on which the *Meditations* are constructed should be interpreted in a much broader and more complex manner than is often admitted. Not only does this mean avoiding a *petitio principii*, assuring oneself that what is being established does not depend on knowledge not yet acquired, nor does it only mean disposing of ideas according to the order of discovery instead of a logical order (CSM II 110–1; AT VII 155–6), but it also means accepting the fact that the same ideas that are used change their meaning and thus can indicate different doctrines in the process.<sup>7</sup> If the Aristotelian must be insensibly guided toward truth, it will be necessary that she first recognize herself in the ideas used at the very beginning of the meditation, and then that those ideas are gradually modified so that she no longer recognizes them as her own.

It is not by chance that all interpreters who have explicitly rejected the use of the doctrine of the free creation of eternal truths referred to the logic of the order of reasons in the *Meditations*. One of the first to do so was Martial Gueroult who, arguing against Bréhier, rejected the presence of the omnipotent Cartesian God in the First Meditation by invoking the order of reasons, which shows that the clear and distinct idea of God had not yet been achieved at that stage in the *Meditations*.<sup>8</sup> However, Gueroult's order of reasons is after all a logical order, in which, according to Descartes, that which precedes does not logically depend on that which follows. Moreover, Gueroult himself took some concepts from the First Meditation to express what he takes to be true Cartesian thought.<sup>9</sup> Harry Frankfurt's reading of the First Meditation remains closer to the meditative order: not only is the protagonist of the *Meditations* a man who does not yet possess Cartesian knowledge, but above all he is a man who has other theories, in particular the naïve and pre-philosophical theories derived from common sense. The knowledge confirmed by the First Meditation can neither be interpreted in light of a Descartes who has completed the meditative journey nor can it be assumed in order to interpret any Cartesian doctrine because such an interpretation runs the risk of confusing the reader-meditator's pre-philosophical state with Cartesian philosophy.<sup>10</sup>

However, it is reductive to view the reader-meditator of the *Meditations* only as having a naïve level of common sense; there is no lack of sophisticated doctrines that can be cited in order to illustrate the reader's initial ideas; so his "naïvety" can be taken literally and not just in reference to common sense naïvety.<sup>11</sup> As inferred from the previously cited letter to Mersenne, the reader-meditator of the First Meditation is a sophisticated man, indoctrinated in the philosophy of the time, and particularly—but not exclusively—in the scholastic-Aristotelian philosophy, from whose shadows the *Meditations* will lead the reader to Cartesian enlightenment. The premise that all knowledge comes from the senses, cited by Descartes as the fundamental belief from which he departed at the beginning of the meditative journey, is certainly a spontaneous belief adopted in infancy.<sup>12</sup> But it is also, and maybe above all, a premise of the scholastic-Aristotelian philosophy ingrained in the reader-meditator. If common sense is present, it is because, for Descartes, Aristotelianism is a sophisticated systematization of prejudices that are adopted in infancy and that feed common sense. Therefore, in order to reconstruct the intellectual persona of the meditator, we must engage a system of refined philosophical beliefs, and it is only appropriate to draw on this system of beliefs if we wish to understand Descartes' thesis and the ordering of problems presented at the beginning of the meditative journey. Thus, in the following sections we will see whether this system of beliefs

indeed allows the interpretation of doubt motivated by the divine deceit by the idea of the free creation of eternal truths.

### **3. God and Mathematics in the First Meditation**

In order to use the doctrine of the free creation of eternal truths as an interpretive tool, two conditions have to be met: first, there has to be a clear and distinct idea of divine power;<sup>13</sup> second, eternal truths, and therefore mathematical truths, must be conceived in such a way that it is legitimate to cite that power as their source. In fact, not every theory about the nature of mathematics allows a submission of mathematics to the divine creative power, even when there is a clear and distinct notion of divine power. Descartes emphasizes that the ideas of mathematics must be created by God because “these . . . are something,”<sup>14</sup> and therefore they depend on God just as every real being does. In other words, a Platonic conception of mathematics that attributes reality to mathematical entities is necessary for explaining the dependency of such entities on the divine order. If the objects of mathematics were unreal entities or abstract ideas derived from the experience of external bodies, that is, if such entities depended for their existence on the mind that thinks them or on the body in which they exist, then they would not have a reality, at least unto themselves, and therefore it would not make sense to think of them as created by God. As has been widely noted, Descartes explicitly theorizes the Platonic conception of mathematics in the Fifth Meditation. However, it remains to be seen whether this is already present in the First Meditation. In short, in order to understand if the doctrine of the free creation of eternal truths is present in the First Meditation, we must consider whether its assumptions are also present within this meditation.

A clear and distinct idea of infinite divine power is conspicuously absent from the First Meditation. The reader-mediator does not have a clear and distinct notion of God, but rather has a “long-standing opinion” of him: “And yet firmly rooted in my mind is the long-standing opinion that there is an omnipotent God” (CSM II 14; AT VII 21). Nor is a clear and distinct idea of the infinite divine power necessary to hypothesize deception, insofar as “lesser” things such as “fate or chance or a continuous chain of events” can also bring forth deception, and “the less powerful [such things] make my original cause, the more likely it is that I am so imperfect as to be deceived all the time” (ibid.), while necessary truths depend solely on the divine power of God. The question concerning mathematics is nuanced, especially because the reader does not find explicit indications of the conception of mathematics in the First Meditation. But the mystery only arises for the modern reader. As



Mark Olson has demonstrated, a contemporary of Descartes would not have struggled to recognize the Aristotelian theory of mathematics present in the First Meditation, which was shared by most scholastic thinkers of Descartes' time.<sup>15</sup>

The Aristotelian philosophy of mathematics, as theorized by Thomas Aquinas, views mathematical concepts as abstract ideas obtained from external bodies. Knowledge starts with singular bodies, whose qualitative characteristics are perceived by the senses, and develops by distinguishing the species—that is, the universal descriptions of individual classes—and the “common sensibles,” or the characteristics that the bodies possess in virtue of being subject to quantification; the latter constitute the condition of knowledge because they provide the “proper sensibles,” or the qualities that are directly felt.<sup>16</sup> Knowledge of the quantitative characteristics common to singular bodies is obtained in this way, regardless of the “individual perceptible matter” of these characteristics; in this case, the content of knowledge is the “common perceptible matter.” The physical sciences function at this level, whereas mathematical knowledge aims at a higher level of abstraction. In fact, it is possible to abstract from “common perceptible matter” by just considering “common intelligible matter” (ST I q.85, a.1).

The reality that exists outside of the mind is still central to “common perceptible matter” insofar as it constitutes a shared component of all bodies, while knowledge of “common intelligible matter” excludes reference to external existence. Like physical science, mathematics considers the elements common to all bodies, yet it considers them not so much as components of external bodies but rather as concepts through which the notion of “substance” is given in its quantitative aspect. Common matter, which was “perceptible” in physics, now becomes “intelligible” matter. Physics abstracts from singular bodies but not from existing common matter; mathematics abstracts from already existing common matter but not from the concept of “substance” and its quantitative characteristics; and finally, metaphysics looks beyond even common intelligible matter, operating at a further level of abstraction (*ibid.*).<sup>17</sup>

The Aquinian theory of abstraction can be traced out in the stages of doubt within the First Meditation, where it is discussed, along with the knowledge of material things, in the context of the gradual abstraction of the knowledge of external bodies, following the hypothesis that all perceptions of the external world are really just a dream. According to this hypothesis, the mind introduces complex ideas out of simple elements, despite these ideas not existing in the external world. Yet, such elements could not have been invented on their own. Thus, even if all of experience were a continuous dream, there are things that are “simplest and most general” (CSM II 14; AT VII 20)—that nevertheless remain

real—that is, they exist outside of the mind. This is the case even if the singular forms (e.g., individual bodies) do not exist and even if the parts of these forms—the eyes, the head, and the hands—are a product of the imagination.

It must at least be admitted that certain other even simpler and more universal things are real. . . . This class appears to include corporeal nature in general, and its extension; the shape of extended things; the quantity, or size and number of these things; the place in which they may exist, the time through which they may endure, and so on. (CSM II 14; AT VII 20)

The protagonist acquires knowledge from these simple and universal elements despite lack of existential reference. Therefore, it holds true that “whether I am awake or asleep,” mathematics is still operative, “for whether I am awake or asleep, two and three added together are five” (ibid.). The hypothesis of the dream therefore rejects the truth of all knowledge that attributes an external reality to the images derived from the composition of simple elements, but it leaves intact both the existence of those elements and the operation that the mind carries out when it considers them pure concepts devoid of existential reference.

In the hypothesis of the deceiving omnipotent God, doubt reaches the ultimate level when both kinds of knowledge operating in the dream argument are consecutively rejected, making it possible to doubt both the existence of the final components of external reality and the truth of mathematical operations.<sup>18</sup> The Cartesian list of simple and universal things through which the deceiving God exercises his power intersects with the Aquinian list of quantitative characteristics common to all forms that are known through abstraction from the bodies themselves: “figura . . . quantitas . . . magnitudo et numerus . . . locus . . . tempus [shape, quantity, size and number, place, time], lists Descartes (CSM II 14; AT VII 20); “motus, quies, numerus, figura, et magnitudo [motion, rest, number, shape, and size],” lists Aquinas, following Aristotle.<sup>19</sup> The fact that the “simple and general things” operative in mathematics are not themselves the mathematical entities later discussed in the Fifth Meditation but are the abstract characteristics of the “common perceptible matter” in the sense common to the Aristotelian tradition, can be inferred first from the way in which such things come to be known: they are not known innately but are obtained by extracting the simple and general elements from the knowledge of external bodies. Second, the same otherwise enigmatic passage from simple elements endowed with external existence to mathematics, first in the dream hypothesis and then in the hypothesis of divine deception, is properly explained only if this knowledge concerns the *same elements* at two different levels of abstraction, as is already the case in the Aquinian theory. Finally,



the very terminology used by Descartes confirms the presence of this scholastic theory. Matter, considered as something simple and general, is referred to by Descartes as “corporeal nature in general [*in communi*]” (CSM II 14; AT VII 20)—that is, by using the technical term with which Aquinas indicated the matter common to all singular bodies that is known by way of abstraction from them: “*materia est duplex, scilicet communis, et signata vel individualis* [matter is twofold: common and sealed or individual]” (ST I q.85, a.1; emphasis added).<sup>20</sup>

The scholastic and Cartesian views of mathematics are not only different, they are radically incompatible. In the scholastic theory of mathematics, only singular bodies exist outside of the mind; mathematical entities do not have any real existence independent of the bodies from which they are abstracted. They exist only in the mind of someone who has carried out the process of abstraction. In Cartesian theory, the entities of mathematics are independent both of their exemplification in singular bodies and of the mind thinking them:

I find within me countless ideas of things which even though they may not exist anywhere outside me still cannot be called nothing; for although in a sense they can be thought of at will, they are not my invention but have their own true and immutable natures. (CSM II 44; AT VII 64)

The first view outlined here is an *empiricist* conception of mathematics, while the second is a *Platonic* conception. The second cognitive model is attained only after the pretenses of the first model (which require that all knowledge should be obtained from the senses) have been nullified. Descartes discovers the second model in the Fifth Meditation, after having bracketed all knowledge of external bodies. And, as we know, it is only the Platonic model that is amenable to theorizing a creative relationship between God and mathematical entities.

The fact that the philosophy of mathematics in the First Meditation is founded on the Aquinian theory of abstraction—that is, founded on the prevailing theory that was repeated in Descartes' time—should already be convincing enough to show that an educated reader would have read the Aristotelian-Aquinian theory (and not the Cartesian one) within the First Meditation. This is in line, moreover, with the Cartesian project to guide the meditator on a path starting from common cultural knowledge. Nevertheless, I will support this claim with textual evidence, dating a few decades after the original publication of the *Meditations*, from which it follows not only that in 1701 the common theory of abstraction was still the Aristotelian-Aquinian theory, the one echoed in the First Meditation, but also that this was intended as irreducible and in opposition to the Cartesian-Platonic theory of the Fifth Meditation.

This evidence comes from John Norris, a Malebranchian well known for his deep ties to scholasticism.<sup>21</sup> In his compelling work, *An Essay towards the Theory of the Ideal or Intelligible World*, Norris opposes the abstraction of the ideal essences of things known in God (in a Malebranchian sense) to the common “Doctrine of Abstraction.”<sup>22</sup> According to this doctrine, there is a triple abstraction of matter, on which a triple distinction of the sciences is modeled:

*Physics* is said to Abstract from Matter, but tis only singular Matter  
. . . *Mathematics* is said to Abstract not only from singular Matter,  
but even from Matter in common, but not really, but only *Secundum*  
*Rationem*, as being really conversant about material Beings, tho’ not  
defined with respect to them as such. (ETII 59)

Metaphysics is abstracted from all matter, both singular and common. It is also notable that not only is mathematics presented according to the Aquinian model—that is, as the product of the abstraction from common perceptible matter—but that the terminology remains the same in the passage from Aquinas to Descartes to Norris: *materia communis* [common matter] (Aquinas), *natura corporea in communi* [corporeal nature in common] (Descartes), matter in common (Norris).

According to this theory of abstraction, mathematics only exists in the mind, and singular bodies only exist in reality. The shapes “in reality” are given only if the bodies are given. Nevertheless, they can become the focus of a study independent from bodies “for the way in which they are considered” (ETII 60) or, rather, by mentally abstracting some characteristics from the bodies that in reality are never found on their own. According to Norris, the Cartesian-Malebranchian conception of mathematics is opposed to the common theory of abstraction. In fact, if mathematical entities as such are considered the content of intelligible knowledge and not abstractions from perceptible knowledge, then geometry is no longer abstracted from matter “not only according to the manner of Conception but also in very deed and reality, and so is every whit as Abstract a Science as *Metaphysics*, as being equally conversant about the *Immaterial* Objects of the *Intelligible World*” (ibid.). The common (Aristotelian) doctrine of abstraction works by separating in the mind that which in reality is not separate, while the Cartesian-Malebranchian theory views mathematical entities in their true separation from the bodies in which they can be exemplified. For this reason the two theories are irreducible to one another.

Due to its chronological proximity to the Cartesian text, Norris’ *Essay* offers a valuable tool for deciphering what the educated reader of the time would have read in the *Meditations*, namely the scholastic theory of mathematics founded on the presupposition that all knowledge is derived

from perceptible experience in the First Meditation, and a Platonic theory of mathematics that is opposed to it in the Fifth Meditation. Both the deceiving God and the mathematics addressed in the First Meditation are therefore opposed to the respective Cartesian theories: the deceiving God of the First Meditation is the author of a deception that does not require an infinite power, while the Cartesian God is truthful and infinitely powerful; the mathematical theory of the First Meditation is Aristotelian and empiricist, while Cartesian theory is Platonic and idealist. It therefore does not seem possible to rest a doctrine so closely tied to Cartesian metaphysics and to the Cartesian mathematical theory, such as the free creation of eternal truths, on pillars that are so thoroughly pre-Cartesian, if not anti-Cartesian.

#### 4. The Nature of Doubt

If the conditions for establishing the theory of the free creation of eternal truths are absent in the First Meditation, then the deception carried out by the God of long-standing opinion (*vetus opinio*) cannot be related to the deception that is possible only for God, the creator of essences; nor can it be tied generally to the foundations of the new Cartesian science for which it is nevertheless imperative to include the philosophy of mathematics from the Fifth Meditation. On the one hand, the deception of the First Meditation should be read as a pre-Cartesian trick and be considered “traditional,” like the knowledge that it brings into question. On the other hand, this deception should be able to make any human knowledge uncertain. And yet, if the mathematics that is discussed in the First Meditation exists *only* in the mind—which evidently makes it a product of abstraction—then *only* the power that God has over the mind, and not the power that God has over things, concerns deception in mathematics.

The God of the Ockhamist tradition is a God that has power over the mind but not over eternal truths, and that, acting on behalf of that power, can enact irremediable deceit, as described in Tullio Gregory's well-known article on the scholastic origins of the Cartesian deceiving God.<sup>23</sup> However, perhaps it is not necessary to go back in time as far as Gregory has led us. In the rich dossier of possible sources concerning the Cartesian deceiving God, there is one potential source that has long been neglected, despite its chronological proximity to Descartes and the fact that Descartes would have certainly been familiar with it, which should have privileged it above all others: it is the discourse on the possible divine origins of error that Francisco Suárez examines in disputation 9 of his *Disputationes metaphysicae*, titled “De falsitate seu falso.”<sup>24</sup> Descartes certainly had first-hand knowledge of Suárez's *Disputationes*: in fact, he

mentions this text in his response to Arnauld in order to support his theory of the material falsehood of ideas (CSM II 164–5; AT VII 235). However, Suárez deserves to be remembered not only for the doctrine of the material falsehood of ideas, which is indeed marginal within Cartesian philosophy. In fact, in the second section of disputation 9, Suárez advances a more than significant thesis for the foundation of Cartesian science, namely the thesis according to which error is always voluntary while only truth produces inviolable [*invincibile*] assent in the mind.

Suárez questions the origins of error and begins by expressing his desire to address the question from a philosophical and not a theological point of view, which involves omitting a return to original sin and seeking to understand only the natural cause of error.<sup>25</sup> Error is made possible through the fact that, at times, one does not achieve a clear understanding of what one judges. In fact, when the understanding is not clear, the assent to truth is no longer necessary but rather is voluntary, and where the assent is voluntary, it can produce error:

Intellect can be compelled to truth, but not to falsity, speaking in the absolute sense and regardless of any other consideration. And the idea in its act can never sustain a false judgment, if not for the free movement of will. In fact, barring necessity, the intellect can only be determined to the judgment by the will as the intellect is not free . . . . Therefore, true fallacy, that is, fallacy that obtains a false judgment always has its cause close to human will. (DM 9.2.6)

The reason for the mind's different reactions to truth and falsehood is that the intellect is necessarily determined to make a judgment only with the presence of the evidence of a known fact, and this evidence can never be a vehicle for falsity, "as it is grounded on the thing itself, or must necessarily be resolved in a clear and demonstrated principle" (ibid.). Discussing the origins of error, Suárez therefore located the criteria for recognizing truth within the necessity of assent.

Suárez's objection to this thesis takes the form of a hypothesis of a deceit that would compel assent by an external agent. In such a case, error would be involuntary and the inviolable assent would no longer be a certain sign of truth. As noted above, the Suárezian problem of the *Disputatio* becomes central to the *Meditations*: If that which is not doubttable is the only natural sign that the human mind has in order to discern the true from the false, does it mean that what is impossible to doubt is also necessarily true? According to Suárez, and later Descartes, the hypothesis of an inviolable error provoked by an external agent assumes the form of a malevolent angel (*angelus malus*)—an evil genius for Descartes—and of a deceitful God capable of causing the mind to irresistibly assent to falsehood: "You will say: sometimes the intellect can be compelled by an external cause, God or an angel, who, if malevolent,

can propose a false thing in such a way that the intellect cannot dissent" (DM 9.2.7). The hypothesis of an inviolable trick carried out by a superior creature is not an exercise in philosophical fantasy, according to Suárez. In fact, it is a metaphysical translation of a frequent experience when something false appears to us as irresistibly true:

In confirmation, it will be noted that at times what appears to be evident is only an appearance [*apperens tantum*]: therefore in this case, its content can be false, and it can nevertheless compel the intellect no less than it would if it were true. (DM 9.2.7)<sup>26</sup>

If God or the malevolent angel could perform such a trick, it would be impossible to distinguish true knowledge from false knowledge using the criteria provided by Suárez, that is by the presence or lack of inviolable assent.

Suárez adopts two different arguments to reject the hypothesis of irresistible deceit carried out in the mind either by God or by a malevolent angel. In the case of God, the hypothesized deceit would constitute an action above the natural order, which is possible only by divine power.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, given that God is inherently good, his goodness makes it impossible for him to exercise that power, and therefore God cannot in any way be the origin of falsity.<sup>28</sup> In the case of the *angelus malus* [evil angel], the hypothesized deceit is absolutely impossible because the angel has no power over the human intellect and therefore can never produce irresistible assent. At most, the malevolent angel can use rhetorical strategies to produce false judgments, which nevertheless are always refutable.<sup>29</sup> Although the malevolent angel's actions do not contradict Suárezian doctrine, if God were not both benevolent and omnipotent, the theory according to which irresistible assent is always a certain sign of truth would become unsustainable.

Many elements demonstrate how Suárez's text works in close connection with Descartes' *Meditations*. Suárez's theory of error anticipates Descartes in the Fourth Meditation almost verbatim: error is always the product of free choice and therefore always avoidable, argues Descartes, and only truth makes assent possible. In general, Suárez's question concerning irresistible assent as a sure mark of truth becomes a central problem of the Cartesian text. The idea that we can ground the truth of propositions that we cannot doubt on God's goodness is a sort of synopsis of the *Meditations*. Related to the hypothesis of the deceiving God, it is striking that Suárez's discourse on the possible deceit carried out by God or by an angel does not occur in the traditional context of examining divine power but instead occurs within the discussion on the differences between the true and the false and the possibility of tracing a sure sign of truth. And similarly, it is striking that the hypothesis of the deceiving

God is only cited in order to present an insurmountable obstacle to obtaining a certain criterion for distinguishing the true from the false. But there are also other details that are worth discussing.

First, Suárez distinguishes the power of God from the power of the *angelus malus* in a manner that fully accounts for the distinction in Descartes' text. Not only are the areas of deceit different—the belief concerning external objects in the case of the demon, and the belief concerning matter that lacks external existence in the case of God<sup>30</sup>—but there is also a difference in the quality of the deceit: one can always resist the deceit of the evil genius, while it would be impossible to avoid God's deceit because he would achieve it by creating irresistible assent within the mind. "Man can always dissent or at least suspend his consent, if he desires" (DM 9.2.7), Suárez states in reference to the deceit of the *angelus malus*. And Descartes, while addressing the same evil genius, underlines the ability of the meditator to not concede his assent:

I shall stubbornly and firmly persist in this meditation; and, even if it is not in my power to know any truth, I shall at least do what is in my power, that is, resolutely guard against assenting to any falsehoods, so that the deceiver, however powerful and cunning he may be, will be unable to impose on me in the slightest degree. (CSM II 15; AT VII 23)

In contrast, divine deceit would make it impossible to refuse to assent to falsehood. The assent to false propositions, in this case, would be necessary as the assent to the propositions cited at the beginning of the Third Meditation:

Let whoever can do so deceive me, he will never bring it about that I am nothing, so long as I continue to think I am something; or make it true at some future time that I have never existed, since it is now true that I exist; or bring it about that two and three added together are more or less than five, or anything of this kind in which I see a manifest contradiction. (CSM II 25; AT VII 36).

Second, Suárez admits the possibility of the deceit given divine omnipotence but rejects such a possibility on the basis of God's goodness: "God cannot induce false intellect, because this is offensive to his goodness no less than lying" (DM 9.2.7). Descartes echoes this thought: "But perhaps God would not have allowed me to be deceived in this way, since he is said to be supremely good" (CSM II 14; AT VII 21). In the first rejection of the hypothesis of divine deceit, the emphasis of Descartes' claim of God's goodness (and not God's omnipotence) symbolizes the pre-Cartesian origins of the God of the First Meditation. Descartes' God is incapable of deceit due to his omnipotence or his truthfulness, or more generally because of his perfection (CSM II 35; AT VII 52), not due to his putative goodness, **which is an attribute that**



Descartes' theology judges to be arbitrary. Thus, Descartes' text demonstrates the completely pre-Cartesian source of the inhibition of deceit through appeal to God's goodness. Moreover, divine goodness, like the deceiving God of the First Meditation, is presented as a *vetus opinio*: God is not good, but "is said to be" supremely good. Later, Descartes is required to address the everyday experience of error, which is apparently in conflict with divine goodness and also with deceit, leaving open a pathway for a meditative process that was closed too quickly by Suárez's claim concerning divine goodness: "But if it were inconsistent with his goodness to have created me such that I am deceived all the time, it would seem equally foreign to his goodness to allow me to be deceived even occasionally" (CSM II 14; AT VII 21). It is well known that all of the Fourth Meditation is dedicated to rejecting the presupposed incompatibility between error and a truthful God, which in the First Meditation was used in order to sustain the fledgling meditative process.

Third, Suárez makes the hypothesis of divine deceit conceivable and credible given the parallel with natural deceit concerning the appearance of evidence. Divine deceit shares a parallel quality with cases of persistent failure—in cases where the appearance of truth forces assent as if the mind really faces the true:

In confirmation, it will be noted that at times what appears to be evident is only an appearance [*apperens tantum*]: therefore, in this case, its content can be the false, and it can nevertheless compel the intellect to assent no less than it would if this content were the true. (DM 9.2.7)

Each time Descartes raises the hypothesis of divine deceit, it is supported with the same example: "What is more, since I sometimes believe that others go astray in cases where *they think they have the most perfect knowledge*, may I not similarly go wrong every time I add two and three?" (CSM II 14; AT VII 21; emphasis added). Moreover, the analogy of divine deceit with natural deceit provides a clear explanation for interchangeability in the cause of the deceit that is manifested in the First Meditation: it is either divine power or a defect in nature.

Finally, divine deceit is true deceit, akin to a lie; it is not a manifestation of omnipotence characterized in non-moral terms. Descartes underlines deceit's truthfulness several times: "fallat me quisquis potest [anyone can deceive me]"; "aliquem Deum . . . deceptorem [God deceives]" (CSM II 25; AT VII 36); "me deludat [I am deceived]" (CSM II 19; AT VII 29). It is for this reason that deceit can, according to Suárez, or could, according to Descartes, be impeded by God's goodness: "God cannot induce false intellect, because this is offensive to his goodness" (DM 9.2.7). Descartes echoes this idea: "But perhaps God would not have

allowed me to be deceived in this way, since he is said to be supremely good" (CSM II 14; AT VII 21).

If the deceit hypothesized by Suárez is the same deceit discussed in Descartes, it follows that the deceit of the First Meditation implies an absolute divine power over the mind insofar as the mind is created by God. Like Descartes, Suárez insists that deceiving the mind is possible because the mind is a divine work. Suárez writes that "the angel cannot determine the judgment of the intellect . . . only God can do this, *who is its creator*," and Descartes describes "an omnipotent God *who made me the kind of creature I am*" (CSM II 21; AT VII 14; emphases added). However, it also follows that divine deceit, according to Descartes, does not necessarily indicate a divine power over truth and falsehood. Rather, the Suárezian source of the divine deceit hypothesized by Descartes adds an additional difficulty to the alliance between the deceiving God of the First Meditation and the God who is the free creator of eternal truths. Though it is precarious to make such claims, if there is a conclusion of which we can be sure, it is that Suárez is Descartes' adversary, above all others, regarding the doctrine of the free creation of eternal truths. As is widely known, Suárez is the philosopher who made eternal truths independent from divine will, suggesting that such truths would remain valid even if God did not exist.<sup>31</sup> And it appears at least improbable that Suárez above all others is at the same time an adversary of the doctrine of the free creation of eternal truths and the source of a hypothesis of divine deceit inspired by that doctrine. A God who has absolute power over the mind but submits to the truth is sufficient for demonstrating that the truth of science is inaccessible to the human mind. For complete scientific knowledge being beyond the reach of the human mind, it is not necessary for God to establish different truths from those that actually exist or make true tomorrow what is false today. It is sufficient that these truths are such that what is true may *seem* false to the human mind.

The way doubt is discussed in the *Meditations* confirms such a reading of divine deceit. Suárez's hypothesis, as noted above, is that divine deceit is manifested by creating an appearance of evidence in the mind: "what appears to be evident is only an appearance [*apparens tantum*]." It is this explicitly indicated doubt at the beginning of the Third Meditation that keeps the gap between indubitability and truth open. In fact, this passage fuels the fear not that what "is" evident can be false, but that what "appears" to be evident can be otherwise in reality: "circa illa deciperer, quae manifestissima viderentur [I may have been deceived even concerning things which seemed to me most manifest]" (and not "quae manifestissima sunt [that are most manifest]"); "quae me puto mentis oculis quam evidentissime intueri [what appears to be the best

evidence]” (and not “*quae evidentissime intueor* [what is the best evidence]”); “*quas valde clare percipere arbitror* [perceptions that appear to me very clearly]” (and not “*quas clare percipio* [perceptions that are clear]”) (CSM II 25; AT VII 36). Both Descartes and Suárez cast the gap between evidence and truth as the gap between the appearance of evidence and evidence itself. Beyond the characterization of the deceiving God and the evil genius, the nature of doubt itself, as described by Descartes, shows that this is the same doubt that Suárez had introduced as an objection against the relationship between irresistible assent and truth.

## 5. Non-Corrupt Nature

Twice throughout the *Meditations*—once at the beginning of the Third Meditation and once in the Fifth Meditation—doubt contends directly with either the hypothesis of a God that creates incorrigible deceit within the mind or with a human nature that is inherently flawed. Concerning the theory of mathematics, the two discussions are separated by an abyss: while the Cartesian theory of mathematics is not yet formulated in the Third Meditation, it is fully theorized in the Fifth Meditation, together with the innatist theory that makes it possible.<sup>32</sup> It follows that in the wake of Suárez, divine deceit at the beginning of the Third Meditation must be carried out in the mind and not through truth, since the necessary conditions for providing the theory of the free creation of eternal truths are lacking at this stage of the mediator’s journey. But as we have seen, Descartes raises doubt again in the Fifth Meditation in order to restate that only after proving God’s existence can science consider itself wholly certain and founded. In the Fifth Meditation, doubt returns with the same elements that characterized it in the First Meditation, and also at the beginning of the Third Meditation:

I can convince myself that I have a natural disposition to go wrong from time to time in matters which I think I perceive as evidently as can be. This will seem even more likely when *I remember that there have been frequent cases where I have regarded things as true and certain, but have later been led by other arguments to judge them to be false.* (CSM II 48; AT VII 70; emphasis added)

Again, doubt rests on the possibility that what I think I understand cannot be truly understood, and doubt once again manifests itself in the examples of false beliefs that the writer does not doubt.

Throughout the *Meditations*, several events lead to a radical change in the ideas that the reader-mediator entertained at the beginning of his journey. Above all, the change in the theory of God’s nature makes the doubt of mathematics conceived in the First Meditation unattainable. But

this doubt remains unchanged throughout the *Meditations*, and always includes the possibility that the human mind is incapable of possessing sufficient means with which to distinguish the true from the false, either because of a congenital defect or because it is induced supernaturally.

The conclusion that these reflections suggest is that, for Descartes, the threat to the certainty and reliability of science is *only* based on the lack of integrity of human nature. It is not based on the relationship between the creator and the mind, and not on the relationship between the creator and the content of knowledge. Descartes' fear is not that the universe that rational inquiry aims to reveal is *truqué* [rigged], to use Henri Gouhier's famous expression,<sup>33</sup> or that God changes the truth in the course of time. Rather, the fear is that human nature is imperfect. To understand this it is in no way necessary to imagine that God has power over essences or truths in such a way that would make it impossible for the atheist to be free from such a fear.

This conclusion heavily influences the judgment of the entire project of the *Meditations*. According to the underlying strategy at work in this text, the project's critical stakes lie in the possibility of demonstrating that the human mind has a perfect origin—a genuine God—and that, therefore, the mind is perfect, like everything that is produced by the hands of that creator: “It would therefore be a contradiction that anything should be created by him which positively tends towards falsehood” (CSM II 103; AT VII 104). The consequence is that the human mind is able to achieve truth with its own means and without supernatural assistance. The paradox, or rather the audacious coherence, of Cartesian metaphysics consists in having reclaimed a clear and distinct understanding of the divine nature for the finite mind in order to free it from every supernatural assistance—grace, revelation—in the conquest of truth. It is not surprising then that the theologians—the authors of the second set of objections—were the ones who had the most reason to object to the Cartesian thesis that the human mind can achieve truth on its own, and hence were more sensitive to the possibility of making the mind self-reliant in its search for truth. The unnamed set of theologians and philosophers put the objection thus:

How do you conclude that we cannot be deceived by him? . . . For if God were to show us the pure truth, what eye, what mental vision, could endure it?

It is not, however, necessary to suppose that God is a deceiver in order to explain your being deceived about matters which you think you clearly and distinctly know. . . . Why should it not be in your nature to be subject to constant—or at least very frequent—deception? How can you establish with certainty that you are not deceived, or capable of being deceived, in matters which you think you know clearly and

distinctly? Have we not often seen people turn out to have been deceived in matters where they thought their knowledge was as clear as the sunlight? (CSM II 90; AT VII 126)

The relevant example drawn from the experience of that which only appears to be self-evident reveals the doubt permeating the entire *Meditations* is here raised as an objection to Descartes: doubt that human nature is imperfect, or the idea that we can be supernaturally deceived becomes a metaphor for a barrier between truth—which is obviously divine, according to the theologians, because the human eye cannot withstand the sight of it—and the finite mind.

Descartes' response to such an objection is precise:


In the case of our clearest and most careful judgments, however, this kind of explanation would not be possible, for if such judgments were false they could not be corrected by any clearer judgments [*plane affirmo*] or by means of any other natural faculty. (CSM II 102–3; AT VII 143–4)

Descartes firmly defends the central point of his philosophy by asserting the power of the human mind without supernatural assistance. It was in fact the translator of the *Meditations*, the Duke of Luynes, who felt slightly uncomfortable translating this confidence, and under whose pen *plane* [clearly] became *hardiment* [boldly] (CSM II 103; AT IX 113). It was certainly a bold move on Descartes' part to wash away every stain on human nature—even and obviously original sin—that obstructed his achievement of the truth.

A modern reader of the *Meditations* might perhaps be more interested to see in the text a project of grounding the sciences that shields them from the caprices of a God freely able to establish the rules of logic. And perhaps the failure of that project, which condemns the human mind to a metaphysical divorce from truth, is even more fascinating. However, Descartes' theological contemporaries, who knew nothing of God as a free creator of the truth, read the *Meditations* otherwise and accurately recognized in it the project to free the search for truth from the natural imperfection of the human mind and the necessity of supernatural assistance. It is against them and to resolve *their* doubt, or rather to reformulate their certainty as a doubt, that the *Meditations*—a text programmatically dedicated to the conversion of a reader captivated by prejudices—was written. Because, if the theologians were correct, if nature or the supernatural had produced an imperfect human reason in need of external assistance, then the Cartesian program to ground the sciences within finite reason would have failed from the very start.

Translated by Cosette Bruhns

## NOTES

1. René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, in vol. 2 of *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 14; henceforth references to this volume, which includes *Meditations on First Philosophy* (pp. 1–62) and *Objections and Replies* (pp. 63–398), will appear as CSM II, followed by page number; *Meditationes de prima philosophia*, vol. 7 of *Œuvres de Descartes*, ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (Paris: J. Vrin, 1982), p. 21; henceforth references to the Adam and Tannery edition will appear as AT, followed by volume in Roman numerals and page number in Arabic numerals.
2. The list of propositions that can be doubted if interpreted within the general category of “clear and distinct ideas,” on behalf of the existence of a deceiving God, which cannot be doubted when considered directly, ends with a summary formula that includes all the propositions “in which . . . I see a manifest contradiction” (CSM II 25; AT VII 36).
3. In a letter to Denis Mesland, Descartes explicitly refers to God’s freedom to not make it the case that “contradictories could not be true together” (René Descartes to Denis Mesland, May 2, 1644, in René Descartes, *The Correspondence*, vol. 3 of *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991], p. 235; henceforth CSMK, followed by page number; Descartes au Père Mesland, 2 mai 1644, in AT IV 118. Émile Bréhier was the first to argue that Cartesian doubt is unintelligible regardless of the theory of God’s free creation of eternal truths (Émile Bréhier, “La création des vérités éternelles dans le système de Descartes,” *Revue philosophique de la France et de l’étranger* 123:5–6 [1937], pp. 15–29). Martial Gueroult argued against Bréhier in *The Soul and God*, vol. 1 of *Descartes’ Philosophy Interpreted According to the Order of Reasons*, trans. Roger Ariew (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), pp. 42–9.  Jean-Luc Marion is responsible for the broadest and most impressive defense of the role of the free creation of eternal truths in Cartesian metaphysics, and of its presence even in the doubt of the First Meditation (see Jean-Luc Marion, *Sur la théologie blanche de Descartes: Analogie, création des vérités éternelles et fondement* [Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1981]).
4. It also happens that Descartes scholars who carry out their analyses of doubt and certainty, moving programmatically on a psychological or epistemological level, reintroduce the free creation of eternal truths in order to explain some aspect of the doubt or the achievement of truth. See, for example, Jeffrey Thumak, “Certainty and Cartesian Method,” in *Descartes: Critical and Interpretive Essays*, ed. Michael Hooker (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), pp. 40–73, esp. 62–3.
5. The example of rays surrounding a circle is given by Thomas Aquinas, who uses it to illustrate the impassible boundaries of divine power (see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, bk. II, chap. 25).



6. Descartes writes: "It will be said that if God had established these 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" (CSMK 23; AT I 145–6).
7. This procedure was best clarified by Michel Foucault who wrote: "A meditation implies, in short, a subject who is mobile and capable of being modified by the very effect of the discursive events that take place" (see "My Body, This Paper, This Fire," appendix 2 of *History of Madness*, trans. Jonathan Murphy and Jean Khalfa, ed. Jean Khalfa [London: Routledge, 2006], p. 563).
8. See Martial Gueroult, "Cartesian Metaphysics and the Order of Reasons," chap. 1 of *The Soul and God*, vol. 1 of *Descartes' Philosophy Interpreted According to the Order of Reasons*, trans. Roger Ariew (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), pp. 3–11.
9. For example, on Gueroult's reading, the theory of simple elements of reality would already be the Cartesian one (see Martial Gueroult, "Cartesian Metaphysics and the Order of Reasons," p. 283nn.32–3). See also Harry Frankfurt, *Demons, Dreamers, and Madmen: The Defense of Reason in Descartes' Meditations* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970), pp. 56–8.
10. See Harry Frankfurt's discussion of the protagonist of the *Meditations* in his *Demons, Dreamers, and Madmen*, pp. 48, 58–9, 61–7.
11. For example, see the list of hypotheses on the origin of the self in the First Meditation, where Stoicism, Epicureanism, and Aristotelianism are respectively alluded to: "seu fato, seu casu, seu continuata rerum serie [by fate or chance or a continuous chain of events]" (CSM II 14; AT VII 21). In the Second Meditation, the lexicon used to characterize the disembodied state of *res cogitans* includes the names taken from the Augustinian and Aristotelian traditions that describe the disembodied condition of the human being: "mens, sive animus, sive intellectus, sive ratio [mind, or intelligence, or intellect, or reason]" (CSM II 18; AT VII 27).
12. For example, Descartes wrote, "Whatever I have up till now accepted as most true I have acquired either from the senses or through the senses" (CSM II 12; AT VII 18).
13. The assumption of the clear and distinct idea of infinite divine power is already present in the initial formulation of the doctrine in the letter to Mersenne dated April 15, 1630. In the same letter, Descartes asks Mersenne to give wide publicity to the new doctrine so that "people get used to speaking of God in a manner worthier, I think, than the common and almost universal way of imagining him as a finite being" (CSMK 23; AT I 146).
14. In his letter to Mersenne dated May 27, 1630, Descartes writes: "I know that God is the author of everything and that these truths are something and consequently that he is their author" (CSMK 25; AT I 152). In the same letter the essences of created things are explicitly identified with eternal truths: "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" (ibid.).
15. See Mark Olson, "Descartes' First Meditation: Mathematics and the Laws of Logic," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 26:3 (1998), pp. 407–38.
  16. "Common sensibles are all reducible to quantity" (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiæ*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province [Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1981], p. 84); I, q.78, a.3; henceforth ST, followed by part number, question number, and article number). Aquinas provides examples of common sensibles in terms of size, number, shape, movement, and stillness (ibid.).
  17. The source of this idea in Aquinas is Aristotle's *Metaphysics* XI.3, 1061a.
  18. Descartes writes, "How do I know that he has not brought it about that there is no earth, no sky, no extended thing, no shape, no size, no place, while at the same time ensuring that all these things appear to me to exist just as they do now? What is more, since I sometimes believe that others go astray in cases where they think they have the most perfect knowledge, may I not similarly go wrong every time I add two and three?" (CSM II 14; AT VII 21).
  19. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's De Anima*, trans. Kenelm Foster and Sylvester Humphries (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951), bk. 2, §386. In this remark, Aquinas is commenting upon Aristotle, *On the Soul*, II.5, 418a18–20.
  20. When Descartes wishes to refer to corporeal nature—distinct from singular bodies and known to be independent of singular bodies—he refers to *corpus in genere* [the body, taken in the general sense] (CSM II 10, 11; AT VII 14, 15). When he refers to the abstract notion of matter pertaining to the scholastic doctrine, he instead speaks of *corpora in communi* [bodies in general] a concept that, precisely because of its abstractness, is even more confused than the individual body, which obviously does not hold for the Cartesian idea of extension. Descartes elaborates this idea in the Second Meditation: "The things which people commonly think they understand most distinctly of all; that is, the bodies which we touch and see. I do not mean bodies in general—for general perceptions are apt to be somewhat more confused—but one particular body [corporea scilicet, quae tangimus, quae videmus; non quidem corpora in communi, generales enim istae perceptiones aliquantò magis confusæ esse solent, sed unum in particulari]" (CSM II 20; AT VII 30); and furthermore, always in reference to the opposition between singular forms (the wax, for example) and abstract ideas: "this particular piece of wax; the point is even clearer with regard to wax in general [hanc in particulari, de cerâ enim in communi clarius est]" (CSM II 21; AT VII 31).
  21. Norris is consistently in dialogue with Francisco Suárez. On the relation between Norris and scholasticism, see Marialuisa Baldi, "Platonismo e 'filosofia delle scuole' nella teoria del mondo intelligibile di John Norris of Bemerton," *Rivista di storia della filosofia* 52:3 (1997), pp. 457–94.

22. John Norris, *An Essay towards the Theory of the Ideal Or Intelligible World* (London: S. Manship, 1704), vol. 1, p. 175; henceforth ETII, followed by page number.
23. See Tullio Gregory, "Dio ingannatore e genio maligno," in *Giornale critico della filosofia italiana* 53 (1974), pp. 477–516.
24. See Francisco Suárez, "De falsitate seu falso," disputatio IX in *Disputationes metaphysicae*, ed. Georg Olms (Hildesheim: Bischöfliche Pressestelle Hildesheim, 2009), section II, subsection IV; henceforth DM, followed by disputation number, section number, and subsection number; [these quotations were originally translated by Scribano from Latin to Italian. All translations into English are my own—Trans.]. This text was highlighted by Norman J. Wells in his "Material Falsity in Descartes, Arnauld, and Suarez," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 22:1 (1984), p. 26, but was then completely ignored by scholars. I examined Suárez's text in "La nature du sujet: Le doute et la conscience," in *Descartes et la question du sujet*, ed. Kim Sang Ong-Van-Cung (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1999), pp. 49–66. See also Emmanuel Faye, *Philosophie et perfection de l'homme: De la Renaissance à Descartes* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1998), pp. 333–4.
25. Suárez writes: "I presuppose that the origin of this falsity can be discovered both from a theological and philosophical point of view. In the first case, the theologian will say that the origin of falsity and every error and human falsity is the original sin" (DM 9.2.3). Moreover, Suárez argues that whosoever perceives error in this way interprets original sin as the deprivation of supernaturally engrained justice, and not as a positive identity that attaches itself to human nature. By consequence, a theological perspective must also address the philosophical aspect of the question, and presume a cause of the error in the human being as such: "And this shows how much it can be seen from a philosophical point of view, both if it addresses an internal principle in man himself, or any external principle, that could persuade man toward error" (ibid.).
26. And Suárez continues, "Answer: of course God can compel the intellect to move according to what is not evident: but this movement follows paths that pass beyond and over the nature of the intellect, while now we only speak of that which occurs according to its nature" (DM 9.2.7).
27. For example, Suárez writes, "But even conceding this miracle, the true and correct doctrine of the theologians teaches that God cannot induce an intellect to believe a falsehood, because this is offensive to his goodness no less than lying. Therefore, it can never be the case that the first origin of fallacy refers to God and that God persuades or produces falseness with an intervention expressly designed for this purpose" (DM 9.2.7).
28. Suárez writes: "Concerning the angel, it must be stated that the angel cannot determine, immediately, the intellect to the judgment or to a second act, making use of its own natural power; in fact only God, who is its author, can do this. Consequently, the malevolent angel has even less ability to compel the intellect to assent to fallacy, but at most it can induce a false assent with suggestive and persuasive arguments. Nevertheless, man can always dissent or suspend his assent, if he so chooses" (DM 9.2.7).

29. Following the theologians, in section 3 of disputation 9 entitled “Unde oriatur difficultas veritatem assequendi,” Suárez adopts a position close to the Aquinian solution to the problem of error, according to which it is impossible to “avoid every error, even in the natural and speculative things . . . because of the limits of our intellect and dependence on the senses” (DM 9.3.10). Concerning this matter, Faye proposes a Cartesian deviation from Suárez’s *Disputationes* (see *Philosophie et perfection de l’homme*, pp. 304–5, 335). However, in the previous text, Suárez supports the voluntary nature of error, moving in the direction assumed by Descartes, according to which it is always possible to avoid error. The thesis of the voluntary nature of the error is obviously different from the one that traces the origins of the error to the limits of human nature. Suárez therefore juxtaposes two incompatible explanations of the phenomenon of error. He often proceeds in this manner, at times making a bold claim, at least with respect to the established Aquinian theory, in order to later back-step in subsequent passages and even align himself with Aquinas. For an example of this Suárezian procedure, which should be noted accurately in order to identify its novelty under the formal respect tributed to the tradition, see Marion, *Sur la théologie blanche de Descartes*, pp. 70–109.
30. See Gregory, “Dio ingannatore e genio maligno,” p. 509.
31. See DM 31.12.45, which is referenced by Descartes in a letter to Mersenne dated May 6, 1630: “So we must not say that if God did not exist nevertheless these truths would be true [*si Deus non esset, nihilominus istae veritates essent veræ*]” (CSMK 24; AT I 149–50).
32. It is true that right at the beginning of the Third Meditation, Descartes speaks of *res Arithmeticas vel Geometrias* [arithmetical or geometrical entities] (CSM II 25; AT VII 35–6), which could raise the question of whether the Platonic conception of mathematical-geometrical entities has already been introduced in the First Meditation. But that expression, taken on its own, is compatible with the Aquinian doctrine of abstraction. In fact, according to Aquinas, mathematics could purposefully abstract from singular bodies, but not from the notion of substance that is subjected to quantity, which is sufficient for discussing *res mathematica* even within this doctrine: “quantities, such as number, dimension, and figures . . . can be considered apart from sensible qualities . . . but they cannot be considered without understanding the substance which is subject to the quantity” (ST I q.85, a1).
33. Henri Gouhier, *La pensée métaphysique de Descartes* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1969), p. 118.