

“The Ontological Status of Cartesian Possibilia”

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Abstract

In this paper I present a novel view of the ontological status of possible objects for Descartes. Specifically, I claim that possible objects *just are* innate ideas considered objectively. In the act of creation, God creates possibilities—in all its richness—in the form of innate ideas. Thus, in acts of thinking, one may clearly and distinctly perceive, via one’s innate ideas, that such and such is possible. To argue this, I first analyze and critique two competing views—one from Calvin Normore who claims that innate ideas represent an independent realm of possibilia, and another from David Cunning and Alan Nelson who claim that Descartes had *no* theory of modality. I then move on to the defense of my view, both giving a positive account of my argument and noting how my interpretation enjoys certain advantages over my interlocutors.

Synopsis

In this paper, I argue for a novel view of the ontological status of Cartesian possibilia. Namely, I claim that possibility for Descartes is simply the objective reality of innate ideas; the ideas are *themselves* possibility. To do this, I first outline two recent accounts of Cartesian modality in the literature. After this, I present my own view—one that is both consistent with Descartes’s other philosophical positions and improves upon the two aforementioned theories.

The first view I cover comes from Calvin Normore. According to Normore, the objective reality of ideas grounds what is possible in Descartes’s metaphysics. Objective reality is just the reality an idea possesses in virtue of what it represents. For Descartes, *only* ideas possess objective

reality. Every idea is *of* something, and, according to Normore, that one has such ideas is proof that what is represented by the idea possibly exists. One upside to his view is that his thesis accords with Descartes's commitment to God as ontologically prior to all other ideas. All reality is dependent upon God, and objective reality is no exception. Objective reality must have a formal cause for Descartes, and that formal cause is God. To tell that such an object is possible, an idea must be clear and distinct. To establish clarity and distinctness, Normore appropriates a medieval theory of meaning and reference and applies it to Descartes's ideas. A move available in the medieval tradition was that the mode (the idea) guarantees the possibility of the object because God supplies the idea to his creatures. Since anything is possible for God, such an idea represents something God could create.

Next is David Cunning and Alan Nelson's (C&N) "No-theory Theory of Modality." They claim that Descartes did not have *any* theory of modality. According to them, *all* purported modal statements are not about possibility and actuality, but of contingency and necessity. Such statements, therefore, only serve to delineate *dependence relations* between actual objects. According to C&N, there are two possibilist ontologies one may cite in favor of Descartes: non-reductive possibilism and reductive possibilism. The latter reduces all possible objects to actual objects, and the former allows for a material difference between the two. Reductive accounts do not work for Descartes because of his views of God. Non-reductive accounts, such as Normore's, also fail. One major reason why Normore's version fails is that the *possibilia* in his view cannot really be clearly and distinctly perceived. Normore's view also suffers from not explaining the nature of the realm of possibility to which the objective reality of an idea refers. Descartes's ontology does not allow for any realm of "pure possibility." Finally, the medieval theory of representation marshaled by Normore is decidedly non-Cartesian.

After this, I present my own view—one that is both consistent with Descartes's other

philosophical positions and improves upon both Normore's and C&N's views. That is, possibility is contained in the objective reality of *innate* ideas. These innate ideas represent *themselves* as possibly existing. Pace Normore, the ideas do not refer us to a realm of possibility which is not at home in Descartes's ontology. I raise one important objection in this section. Namely, my view, like Normore's, seems to conflict with Descartes's theory of perception—a theory foundational to Descartes's philosophical enterprise. Descartes's rule of truth, that “whatever I clearly and distinctly perceive is true,” may preclude my interpretation. Perceptions of certain *possibilia* (for example, chimera or Pegasus) cannot be clearly and distinctly perceived, given their material (and composite) nature and the fact that perceptions of material objects are notoriously confused. If we must not affirm what we do not clearly and distinctly conceive, then we cannot affirm the suspect statements of modality entailed by my theory. I conclude that my view avoids the pitfalls of Normore's non-reductive possibilism and overcomes its strongest objections.

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I. Normore's Possibilities

In “Meaning and Objective Being: Descartes and His Sources,” Calvin Normore argues that Cartesian ideas are uniquely suited as vehicles for meaning and reference. How to secure meaning and reference was a question hotly debated in the medieval period, a tradition with which, Normore assumes, Descartes would have been familiar. Normore appropriates a medieval theory of representation in Descartes’s stead to explain how ideas reference, or make their objects cognitively accessible to the cognizer. One theory of medieval representation holds ideas to be like images. The necessary and sufficient conditions for an idea to be an image of something is for the image to be causally dependent on the thing imaged and appropriately similar to it.¹ But what exactly are the causal dependence and similarity relation? A common view of ideas in the medieval period held that God creates objects by looking at exemplars—i.e., ideas—in his intellect. God’s skill in recreating such ideas cannot be defective or obstructed; the products of his ideas (the created things), then, are perfect exemplars of the ideas. When we perceive an object, God could supply us with an idea of the thing by looking to his divine idea and creating a mode in our minds (which, again, is a perfect exemplar of the thing itself). Since our ideas are then just as much an effect of the divine idea as the object itself, causal dependence on and similarity to the object are preserved.²

With this background in mind, Normore segues into possibility and Descartes. Normore says,

There is a close connection between *esse obiectivum* (objective reality) and possible existence for Descartes. In the *Rationes*...he lays it down as an axiom that possible or contingent existence is contained in every idea of a thing other than God and that necessary and perfect existence is contained in the idea of God. Thus if an idea has objective reality, and is thus *of* a thing, that thing possibly exists. ...The objective reality of an idea of something is then just the possible existence of that thing.³

¹ Calvin Normore, “Meaning and Objective Being: Descartes and His Sources,” in *Essays on Descartes’ Meditations*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), 227.

² *Ibid.*, 237.

³ *Ibid.*, 237-238. Descartes quoted from CSM II, 117.

Grasping possibility, then, would simply be grasping the objective reality of an idea. Normore claims that a virtue of his view is that his thesis connects Descartes's view of ideas and modality, a connection which would explain why he thought that the objective reality of an idea requires a formally real cause: "If objective reality is just possible existence, then the requirement that objective reality have a formally real cause is just a special case of Descartes's view that all reality, both actual and possible, depends ultimately on the divine will."⁴ But how, based on having a certain mode in the intellect, can one tell that some object is possible? There needs to be an account of clarity and distinctness in ideas. This is where the aforementioned theory of representation comes in. A move available in the medieval tradition was that the mode guarantees the possibility of the object. Ockham, for example, uses this approach to answer how there can be many divine ideas in one simple divine mind. He "equates the divine idea of a thing with the thing itself as a possible object, and supposes God to be acquainted with it."⁵ Thus, God could transmit this idea to his creatures and thereby guarantee that perceiving this idea guarantees its possibility. For something to be possible, then, we need only rely on God's power.

II. Cunning and Nelson's "No-theory Theory" of Modality

Contra Normore and, in fact, all those who have ever advanced a Cartesian theory of modality, Alan Nelson and David Cunning (C&N) claim that "Descartes had no metaphysical theory of modality—no theory of possible objects or beings, no theory of necessities and possibilities attaching to propositions, and no theory of different ways that world could have 'really' been. He had no use for such a theory."⁶ In view for C&N are *all* uses of modality. Descartes in no place offers a genuine

⁴ Calvin Normore, "Descartes's Possibilities," in *René Descartes: Critical Assessments*, Vol. III, ed. Georges J. D. Moyal (New York: Routledge, 1991), 68.

⁵ Normore, "Meaning and Objective Being," 238.

⁶ Cunning and Nelson, "Cognition and Modality in Descartes," 137. Many of the themes in this article were first skillfully developed in a previous essay by Nelson (1993). In his article, Nelson claims that all philosophically

modal statement; indeed, all mentions of possibility, necessity, or ways things could have been are analyzable in non-modal terms.

C&N identify two possibilist ontologies that one may advance in favor of Descartes: reductive possibilism (RP), in which possibility is analyzed into actuals in some way, and non-reductive possibilism (NRP), which holds that actuality and possibility carry a univocal sense of being—in Descartes’s case, created by God.⁷ C&N take both views to be untenable for various reasons. For example, no form of RP is possible for Descartes due to his views about God. According to Descartes, “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.”⁸ Moreover, “. . .and in God, willing, understanding, and creating are all the same thing without one being prior to the other even conceptually.”⁹ Given this strong view of divine simplicity, such attributes of God are distinguished in the intellect only by a distinction of reason. If this is the case, then there is nothing God knows that he doesn’t create: “. . .we must rather suppose that there is always a single identical and perfectly simple act by means of which he simultaneously understands, wills, and accomplishes everything. When I say ‘everything’ I mean all things. . .”¹⁰ Thus, if we claim that possibilia are, say, ideas in the mind of God (a version of RP, as it analyzes possibilia into actual features of God), these considerations are fatal to any RP interpretation for Descartes. If God knows something, he creates it. And if God creates it, it is thereby not possible but actual.

After dispensing with RP, C&N’s argument proceeds in three stages: (a) All general mentions of modality for Descartes are non-modal; (b) All modal claims within the context of specific theories are also analyzable in non-modal terms; and (c) Normore’s view, a version of NRP,

interesting uses of possibility in Descartes are analyzable in terms of actually existing things. The article from Cuning and Nelson is a continuation of that thesis.

⁷ Ibid., 137.

⁸ CSMK, 24.

⁹ CSMK, 25.

¹⁰ CSM I, 200-201.

is untenable. I shall now discuss (a) and (c), but leave (b) for later. As to (a), C&N note that Descartes often speaks in straightforwardly modal terms. Upon further analysis, however, his supposed modal talk is analyzable non-modally. For example, consider the passage quoted by Normore above.¹¹ The point of this passage, according to Cuning and Nelson, is not to distinguish between actuality and possibility but between independent, or necessary existence and dependent, or contingent existence. This is supported by both a passage in the *Notae*: "...existence is contained in the concept of God—and not just possible or contingent existence, as in the ideas of all other things, but absolutely necessary and actual existence" and in the First Replies, "...we must distinguish between possible and necessary existence. It must be noted that possible existence is contained in the concept or idea of everything that we clearly and distinctly understand; but in no case is necessary existence so contained except in the case of the idea of God."¹² Upon further inspection, there is no modal talk involved in these passages. They simply contrast the nature of God and what God creates. C&N conclude, "...that Descartes's use of the language of necessity and possibility in these texts is always referring to the ontological distinction between the divine attribute of necessary (independent, infinite) existence and the creaturely attribute of contingent (dependent, finite) existence."¹³

Finally, regarding (c), C&N address what they take to be the strongest version of NRP, Normore's already discussed theory of possibility. While they find much to praise in Normore's account, they ultimately conclude it fails for several reasons. First, you cannot clearly and distinctly perceive the possibilia in Normore's view. My view encounters the same problem, and I will thus suspend comment on this objection until later in the paper. Secondly, the ontological status of the

¹¹ "Existence is contained in the idea or concept of every single thing, since we cannot conceive of anything except as existing. Possible or contingent existence is contained in the concept of a limited thing, whereas necessary and perfect existence is contained in the concept of a supremely perfect being."

¹² CSM I, 306; CSM II, 83.

¹³ Nelson and Cuning, "Cognition and Modality in Descartes," 142-143.

possibilia that Normore claims exist is unclear. If the objective reality of an idea represents possibility, we need an account of the possibilia. But remember, Descartes's ontology is necessarily circumscribed: he allows only substances and their modes. What sort of thing is pure possibility, the very thing that, on Normore's account, ideas purport to represent objectively? Normore's view violates Descartes's strict ontology. Third, Normore's account of representation, while faithful to the medieval tradition, is not particularly Cartesian. Instead of ideas representing possibilia as images in the medieval sense (that of the image being appropriately similar and causally connected to the object), a much more Cartesian sense of representation holds that ideas are intrinsically representational.¹⁴ This reading of representation also explains why objective reality stands in need of a formal cause: "Descartes thought that objective reality...must derive its being from something; ultimately it must derive from God, as Normore stresses. Ideas of finite things derive from other finite things, and ideas of infinite things—i.e. God—derive from God." On this view of representation, "There is no need to postulate new entities that rest uncomfortably in a dualistic ontology in order to account for the objective reality of ideas."¹⁵ C&N thus conclude that Descartes had no theory of modality.

III. Possibilia as Innate Ideas

I now offer my novel view of Cartesian possibility. My thesis is that possibility is contained in the objective reality of innate ideas. In the act of creation God creates possibility *qua* possibility—in all its richness—in the form of innate ideas. This, then, would be a version that C&N deem as NRP: there is a univocal sense of existence shared by actuality and possibility— viz., created by God. On

¹⁴ Ibid., 149-150. This account of representation referenced here is thoroughly outlined in Nelson (1996). I agree with Nelson that his thesis of how ideas represent for Descartes is more faithful to the textual evidence, and I thus follow his account.

¹⁵ Ibid., 150.

this view, innate ideas are possibility—full stop. They simply *are themselves* possibility (not actuality!). These innate ideas, then, represent genuine possibility: *they represent themselves as possibly existing*. This is the simple presentation of my thesis. What remains is to explain the particulars—especially how innate ideas function as possibility.

Innate ideas are those ideas “inborn, implanted (as seeds), primitive or primary to the mind...”¹⁶ All innate ideas are ultimately supplied by God in the creative act. These ideas are responsible for the richness of *all* thought: the genesis of all our ideas, therefore, comes from the native, innate ideas. Descartes sometimes calls these ideas “simple notions.” Examples of innate ideas are the idea of God (which is ontologically prior to all ideas in virtue of containing the greatest objective reality), extension, thinking (which is epistemically prior to all other ideas, as it is discovered first by the Meditator), sense data, and eternal truths.¹⁷ Examples given for the simple notions are, “it is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be at the same time” and “He who thinks cannot but exist while he thinks.”¹⁸ Descartes mentions innate ideas in the Third Meditation when he begins to wonder about the existence of things outside himself *qua* thinker: “Among my ideas, some appear to be innate, some to be adventitious, and others to have been invented by me.”¹⁹ Although this well-known tripartite classification partitions ideas into those innate, those coming from the senses (adventitious), and those created by the thinker (factitious), there is a sense in which *all* ideas are innate. All ideas, considered simply as modes of mind possessing formal reality come from the mind’s ability to produce such ideas.²⁰ I will stop here and note that just these facts ground possibility in what I deem the weak sense: if we use those classic innate ideas which

¹⁶ Alan Nelson, “Cartesian Innateness,” in *A Companion to Descartes*, eds. Janet Broughton and John Carriero (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2011), 319.

¹⁷ Sense data are offered as an example of innateness with important qualification. They are only innate in certain contexts. But this is not important for this paper. See the Nelson entry cited in the above footnote.

¹⁸ CSM I, 208-209.

¹⁹ CSM II, 35-36.

²⁰ Nadler, “The Doctrine of Ideas,” 94.

Descartes explicitly names, we thereby ground some amount of possibility. If we perceive, for example, extension and geometrical qualities, there is a sense in which we can imagine extension with any number of geometrical qualities—i.e., possible ways for an extended thing to be. The same story can be given for innate ideas of thinking.

This sort of weak possibility is not ontologically rich. A strong sense of possibility—one which grounds the entirety of things that could have been—is much more desirable. And indeed, I think we can look closer at the concept of innateness and tell a story for this. What is it about the ideas of God, extension, etc. that make them innate? We must begin by looking at the concept of clear and distinct perception (CDP) and how it relates to the notion of *material falsity*. Very generally, CDP is described as “a great light in the intellect [that compels one to assent]” and judgments we cannot but believe as true while we consider them.²¹ When doing philosophy, Descartes exhorts us to withhold judgment if it is not clear and distinct.²² All innate ideas are perceived clearly and distinctly.²³ But our judgment of ideas (even innate) may go wrong and be *materially false*. When an idea is materially false, it provides subject matter for false judgment.²⁴ Material falsity happens when one mixes, intermingles, or confuses innate ideas with external sensory events: “...there is nothing in our ideas which is not innate to the mind or the faculty of thinking, with the sole exception of those circumstances which relate to the experience.”²⁵ Thus, ideas that involve no affirmations or judgments beyond the ideas themselves are true (i.e., ideas which do not refer to sense experience): “Altogether I think that all those [ideas] which involve no affirmation or negation are innate in us; for the sense-organs do not bring us anything which is like the idea which arises in us on the

²¹ CSM II, 40-41; 103-104.

²² CSM II, 42.

²³ Alan Nelson, “Descartes’s Ontology of Thought,” *Topoi* 16, no. 2 (1997): 163-178.

²⁴ Alan Nelson, “The Falsity in Sensory Ideas: Descartes and Arnauld,” in *Interpreting Arnauld*, ed. Elmar J. Kremer (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 13-32.

²⁵ CSMK, 303-304.

occasion of their stimulus, and so this idea must have been in us before.”²⁶ Providing subject matter for material falsity will result in a judgment that is obscure and confused (the complement of clear and distinct). Thus, those ideas that provide no material for false judgment are clear and distinct.²⁷ And since innate ideas provide no material for false judgment, they are (or can be) clear and distinct, which in turns guarantees the ideas’ truth.

Given this, we avoid a strong objection to my view. As you may recall in the introductory remarks, my view seems to contradict Descartes’s views of perception. Descartes exhorts his readers not to affirm what we do not clearly and distinctly perceive. Truth is conformity of thought with object—i.e., rightly judging the object.²⁸ But perceptions of material objects are notoriously confused. The only thing one clearly and distinctly conceives in material objects is extension and shape. Indeed, to intermingle different ideas is to literally con-fuse them; this results in obscure and confused judgments. But I maintain that the perception of possibilia avoid this difficulty. Consider the idea of chimera, representing either actuality or possibility. The judgment conditions and phenomenology differ in both cases. A chimera as actual is never clearly and distinctly perceived—i.e., it supplies material for false judgment, such as when one attributes color to it. But for the possible idea of chimera, what is the material for false judgment? All we judge is that it is possible; we don’t mix sensory data with this judgment. Nor does the idea’s composite nature cloud our perception. For even given its composite nature, we still clearly and distinctly perceive it is *possible*. That is, we need not perceive an actual chimera to know that chimera is possible. According to Descartes, there is precedent for this in our innate idea of God’s power: “...but after considering the immense power of God, I cannot deny that many other things have been made by him, or at least

²⁶ CSMK, 187.

²⁷ Nelson, “Cartesian Innateness,” 321.

²⁸ CSMK, 139. Another upside of my view is that there is actually an object we judge—the innate idea. This avoids another difficulty for Normore in construing ideas to correspond with a realm of pure possibility. The truth conditions (that there must be an object to which our judgments correspond) would not be met in his case (they are not about an object), but they are met in my case.

could have been made...”²⁹ God thus secures eminently within him the power to create the objects we perceive as possible.

Moreover, the phenomenology of the two cases of perception is different. Remember that Descartes grants that we can know when an idea comes from an external source, and advances arguments in favor of this claim in the Sixth Meditation. So arguably we know when we are being presented with a possible object or an actual object in virtue of our judgment of whether the idea comes from an external source or not. But if it does come from an external source, we plainly do not make any declarations regarding its possibility, for we cannot clearly and distinctly perceive such an object. But the same arguably does not obtain for possible chimera: there is no external source from which to intermingle or confuse the possible idea. So given that we may distinguish the perception of possible (which is clear and distinct) from actual (which is not), and given that God’s power secures the possibility of a wide number of objects, we thereby secure a strong sense of possibility for Descartes.

My view holds that possibility is innate ideas considered objectively. I maintain that any version of possibility for Descartes *must* be a version of NRP, and if we chose a version of NRP, my account is the strongest. As to the former, RP is unsuccessful because Descartes’s views of God are simply recalcitrant. Given the version of RP that holds possibility to be ideas in God’s mind (or any such theory that ascribes possibility to features of God), these possibilities would be therefore created due to Descartes’s acceptance of a strong version of divine simplicity. They would thus be actually existing, and not merely possible. In my version, God foregoes creating certain ideas in his intellect and instead creates possibility in the form of innate ideas to creatures. God, then does not create Pegasus via his idea of Pegasus—this would of course entail Pegasus exists when it does not. Rather, God creates the *idea* of Pegasus at creation, housed in finite minds, much like the innate

²⁹ CSM II, 39.

ideas. The upside of my account is that it rightly recognizes God's ontological priority over all things, whether possible or actual. Moreover, it does no damage the attributes that Descartes so adamantly ascribes to God. It also, as noted earlier, recognizes that for Descartes, human beings as image bearers are endowed with God's ideas. And God can ground all sorts of possibility, as he all the necessary ideas in his intellect already. So at creation, he creates such possibilities as ideas in creature's minds.

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