

OVERCOMING OMNIPOTENCE: THE CRISIS OF DIVINE FREEDOM IN OCKHAM AND DESCARTES

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René Descartes is often considered the father of modernity in that he begins with the self as the source of certainty rather than beginning with the certainty of the cosmos or of God. Descartes' self-foundation is considered an "epochal turning point" in the western consciousness for "basic certainty is no longer centered on God, but on man."¹ This contention assumes that the ancient and medieval worlds concerned themselves with the discovery of order that existed independently of the human and needed only to be known and subsequently reproduced in the individual's own actions. On such an interpretation Descartes' method of hyperbolic doubt does seem like a radical break from the previous era of fundamental trust in the cosmos and in God. My concern here is not with Descartes' influence on those following him, as this seems a reasonable position, but with the historical antecedents prompting Descartes to begin this new path centered in the *cogito*. If it is true that the tradition demonstrates such uniformity in its reliance on God and nature, then one must wonder why Descartes would think such a radical break necessary. It certainly is possible that hyperbolic doubt has no historical motivations or antecedents and springs directly from the mind of Descartes like Athena from the head of Zeus, but closer examination indicates that Descartes is responding to the incoherence of scholasticism and fills a vacuum left by this collapse. More specifically, this essay argues that William of Ockham's radical defense of the omnipotence and absolute freedom of God unintentionally destroys the certainty once provided by God and nature, and this collapse explains Descartes' turn to the self as the new source of certainty.

Of course, any argument attempting to demonstrate the historical antecedents of a thinker must be wary of committing

the fallacy of oversimplified cause, as it is very difficult to demonstrate that any particular antecedent is the sole cause of a subsequent reaction. Consequently, this essay makes no such claim, but posits merely that there are similarities between the two thinkers that are impossible to ignore, particularly the emphasis placed on divine omnipotence and freedom. These similarities were recognized by Hans Blumenberg in Part II of his *Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, but Blumenberg's work, while evocative, is so sweeping in its scope that the particular details of similarity remain unexplored.² Similarly, Louis Dupre makes connections between Ockham and Descartes in *Passage to Modernity*, but his work is also a broad history and is thus limited in the amount of detail it provides.³ It is with Michael Gillespie's work, *Nihilism Before Nietzsche*, that the particulars are worked out in detail.⁴ However, Gillespie takes a rather negative view of Descartes while it is the position of this essay that Descartes' reactions against the omnipotent God of Ockham are both understandable and justified.

Ockham: Omnipotence Above All Else

William of Ockham (c. 1285-1347) was born in the region of Surrey, probably in Ockham near London, and was a member of the Franciscan order that included his predecessors Bonaventure and Duns Scotus. No stranger to controversy, Ockham was excommunicated from the Roman Catholic church for claiming that Pope John XXII was a false pope for rejecting the Franciscan teachings concerning poverty. Of course, Ockham is best known for arguing that

¹ Hans Kung, *Does God Exist: An Answer for Today*, trans. Edward Quinn (New York: Doubleday, 1980) 15.

² Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983) 125-229.

³ Louis Dupre, *Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993) 39-41, 123-125.

⁴ Michael Allen Gillespie, *Nihilism before Nietzsche* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995) 1-64. Blumenberg argues that the medieval system collapses and that modernity's turn to the self is the solution to the inconsistencies of the scholastics.

universals have no extra-mental reality and are thus meaningful only nominally. This section of the essay will first examine Ockham's rejection of universals in light of divine omnipotence and then explore the implications of this rejection for knowledge and science.

Universals and the Omnipotent God

The problem of universals is inescapable in the meeting of Christianity and the philosophy of the Greeks. For the Greeks, cosmology rests on the principle that change of any sort presupposes a change of state in something that already exists: out of nothing comes nothing.⁵ Thus Plato in the *Ti-maeus* argues that the Demiurge creates the world from the pre-existing Forms, and while Aristotle will deny the independent existence of the Forms, he holds in the *Physics* that form and matter are eternal. Christianity, however, holds that God does create *ex nihilo*, although all other agents are limited to change in what pre-exists. It is then impossible for the forms to exist independently of God, for then not only did God not create everything, but what God creates is limited to whatever forms exist.⁶ At the same time, however, God does not simply create by chance, for God creates intelligently and purposively and so must have had a notion of what was to be created before creating the actual thing. Thus, an intelligent God seems to demand universals while the independence of God and the doctrine of creation demands that universals cannot be independent of God.

Augustine's solution is to place the universals in the mind of God. His Platonism is apparent, for while the ideas are not independent, the ideas are eternal and are the exemplary models of all created things. God can then create intelligently and without dependence, but the problem of divine simplicity is raised, for God is absolutely simple and thus cannot have a plurality of ideas. In order to explain the plurality of created things while preserving divine simplicity, Aquinas argues that God knows his own essence, which is simple, but that God's essence is imitable by a plurality of creatures all of whom God knows.⁷ Inasmuch as God knows his own essence as capable of being imitated he also knows the

plurality of creatures but without sacrificing simplicity.⁸ Aquinas solves the dilemma by reference to the essence of God, but Ockham is not satisfied and protests that it is this very essence that contradicts God's omnipotence.

The main of scholasticism asserts that God is omnipotent but also rational, that is to say that God creates everything, and is entirely free in exercising the choice and the means to create, but that God is limited by his essence. Thus, a distinction is made between God's absolute power (*potentia absoluta*) and God's ordered and limited power (*potentia ordinata*) in which God cannot exercise absolute freedom but is limited by God's own goodness and essence. God creates, then, because he is good, and what is good diffuses and communicates itself.⁹ Ockham, however, resists such a solution because it limits the power of God; if God is constrained by an essence or idea it is not simply the case that God has chosen to limit his *potentia absoluta* by an ordered choice, but rather that God's *potentia absoluta* is not absolute at all and is limited by definition. Instead, Ockham accepts as a matter of faith that God is utterly omnipotent and utterly free and is not limited by anything, not even his own essence. God is free to do anything that is not self-contradictory, as Ockham writes: "I prove this first by the article of faith 'I believe in God the Father almighty', which I understand in the following sense: Anything is to be attributed to the divine power, when it does not contain a manifest contradiction."¹⁰

It may seem that the standard of contradiction limits God's omnipotence, and in a very slim way it does, for God cannot contradict the very order that God has created. This is very tenuous, however, for God can perform a myriad of actions outside the norm that are not contradictions. For example, "whatever God can produce by means of secondary causes, He can directly produce and preserve without them."¹¹ Consequently, God can give us an intuition of a star without the star needing to be involved, for in this situation the star normally would be the secondary cause resulting in an intuition of starlight. Further, God could even give us an intuition in the absence of the star, i.e., if the star does not even exist. In the natural world this would be an impossibility,

⁵ See Etienne Gilson, *The Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Edward Bullough (New York: Dorset Press) 132-136.

⁶ Blumenberg 153.

⁷ For a history of the problem of universals see Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy II: Medieval Philosophy* (New York: Image Books, 1993) 136-156. Also, Dupre 35-41.

⁸ Gilson, *Aquinas* 138-139.

⁹ Gilson, *Aquinas* 140-142.

¹⁰ William Ockham, *Philosophical Writings*, trans. Philotheus Boehner (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1990) 26.

¹¹ Ockham 26.

but it is not when God is the cause, and so the limit of non-contradiction does not preclude bizarre actions outside of the normal order of the world.

Furthermore, while it is true that God cannot directly contradict the established order, the order itself is entirely without basis in rationality, for God did not create the order based on any rational standard or even according to his essence. So while God cannot contradict the present order, the present order need not exist and is utterly contingent, as opposed to the earlier scholastics who agreed that God could have created a world different than this, but not at odds with God's essence.¹² Thus, for Ockham, if God is to be truly free in creating the world as God sees fit, then God's nature must be done away with.

God without a nature seems problematic, for "if God has no nature, then no property is essential to him, so that for any property P he has, it is possible that he should have existed but lacked P."¹³ Indeed, all of the qualities generally ascribed to God become accidental and God might have them or not without any violation of God's nature. God may or may not have any quality, even imperfections, but this would be no problem since it would not contradict God's nature and would be perfectly consistent. Of course, Ockham would wish to retain God's omnipotence, as this is the primary point of his thought, so he must solve this problem. Alvin Plantinga explains Ockham's solution as doing away with the very notion of properties on top of eradicating God's nature:

...there is another alternative: do away with the whole Platonic pantheon. Perhaps there aren't any properties at all, in which case God clearly won't be dependent upon any; nor will they constitute perplexing cases of things that he hasn't created and are outside his control. If there are no properties, then God will not have any properties and thus will not have a nature. And from this point of view, the alleged embarrassing consequences mentioned ...are not forthcoming. It does follow that God has no nature and that for any property you pick, he could have existed and lacked it (there being no properties); it doesn't follow, however, that he could have existed and not been omniscient, or good, or powerful. The nominalist doesn't hold that God is not

omniscient; indeed he is, but there's no such thing as the property of omniscience.¹⁴

In one fell swoop the problem of dependence and divine ideas is solved. There are no divine ideas or universals and thus nothing for God to possibly be dependent on, not even God's own nature. Thus God's omnipotence is preserved.

This preservation comes at a price, however, for God lacks a nature and becomes virtually unintelligible. Without nature or essence to limit his actions God created the world for no intelligible reason and according to no discernable order. God is inscrutable, and since God is not limited either by intrinsic nature, goodness, or rationality, God is revealed simply as an exercise in power, as a divine will that exercises his will without any apparent reason.¹⁵ Ockham is consistent, at least, for he realizes that God's will can be completely arbitrary. Ockham even admits that "God can command that He not be loved for a certain time..." and not only would there not be any contradiction in this but it would then be good to hate God.¹⁶ This is a fateful blow to rationality, for God does not serve as the exemplar of rationality but places all rational "constants" into question.

Knowledge and the End of Science

Universals are thus impossible, for then God is dependent on them, but neither can universals exist as God's essence — the very possibility of universals is rejected and only individuals exist. Consequently, Ockham must develop a new epistemology that does away with universals as a principle of knowledge and that explains why humans stubbornly insist on using universals in their judgments.

Ockham begins by dividing knowledge into two types: intuitive and abstractive cognition. Intuitive cognition of a thing "is cognition that enables us to know whether the thing exists or does not exist, in such a way that, if the thing exists, then the intellect immediately judges that it exists," and also "is such that when one thing known by means of it inheres as an accident in another...then non-complex cognition of these things gives us an immediate knowledge whether a certain thing inheres or does not inhere..."¹⁷ Intuitive cognition is the immediate perception of an existing thing, "either a material object: I see Socrates; or of a complex of material objects given together with their actual rela-

¹² Gillespie 14-18.

¹³ Alvin Plantinga, "Does God have a Nature?" in *The Aquinas Lecture, 1980* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980) 62.

¹⁴ Plantinga 62-63.

¹⁵ Blumenberg 151.

¹⁶ Ockham 146-147.

¹⁷ Ockham 23.

tions: I see Socrates is sitting on a stone."¹⁸ Intuitive cognition may also be of a psychological fact, such as a feeling or a thought, but in all cases is certain and self-evident.

Abstractive knowledge is any knowledge that is not intuitive, any knowledge "by which it cannot be evidently known whether a contingent fact exists or does not exist...it does not enable us to know the existence of what does exist or the non-existence of what does not exist."¹⁹ Abstractive knowledge would include any universal concept such as human or good, or any image or memory, so long as the cognition is not immediately apprehended and thus cannot be immediately known to exist.

If I see a person running I am immediately aware that "the man is running." This is based upon intuitive cognition and is certain. The statement, "human is a species" is different, however, for there is no intuitive cognition of "human" but rather intuitions of this human and that human which I can then universalize based upon similarities in the intuitions. Consequently, the term "man" in the first statement is based upon an intuition of a real existing person, while the term "human" in the second statement is based upon abstractive knowledge. While I have intuitions of this person and that person, I have no intuition of human but instead have performed an abstraction noting the similarity between the persons — but as an abstraction I have created an image that does not relate to the existence of a real object. Thus Ockham will claim:

I maintain that a universal is not something real that exists in a subject [of inherence], either inside or outside the mind, but that it has being only as a thought-object in the mind. It is a kind of mental picture which as a thought-object has a being similar to that which the thing outside the mind has in its real existence. What I mean is this: The intellect, seeing a thing outside the mind, forms in the mind a picture resembling it...and this can be called a universal, because it is a pattern and relates indifferently to all the singular things outside the mind...and in this way a universal is not the result of generation, but of abstraction, which is only a kind of mental picturing.²⁰

There are several implications for science and the ability to know God that arise from this conception of knowledge. The first is the end of a realist logic. Of course, since uni-

versals do not exist universal concepts cannot correspond to any extra-mental reality and logic becomes merely a logic of concepts. More than this, however, is the implications for syllogistic logic. Syllogistic logic rests on the middle term, for it is the middle term that unites the major and minor terms. In a realist logic the middle term actually corresponds to an extra-mental reality and thus the conclusion expresses a real relationship between the major and minor term. However, in the syllogism "Socrates is a man, all men are mortal, therefore Socrates is mortal," the middle term, "man," is merely a construct and the relation between Socrates and mortality is not established except in a nominal sense. Which is to say that we cannot judge that a real relationship exists between Socrates and mortality. The same is true of any syllogism, for the middle term will always be an abstractive mental picture and thus fictive. Logic as a means of organizing science and propositions is merely a mental organization, a housekeeping of concepts. This is a "universe which the knower can organize according to certain logical patterns, but such patterns remain a way of dealing with things, not with the way things are or even ought to be."²¹

Second, the law of causality is called into doubt undercutting any real understanding or the relations between objects as well as destroying a natural theology by which God's existence is known. For Ockham, intuitive knowledge teaches us only that there is a certain correlation between events. We do know that every time fire comes into contact with wood that heat is produced, but strictly speaking we do not intuit the cause in this action. Instead we perceive a regular sequence, and while we may call the antecedent a cause and the consequent an effect we have not intuited the causal relationship. While Ockham will defend that causality exists, determining the actual cause of an effect is nothing more than the habit of noticing correlations. Of course this spells the end of natural theology, for if we cannot know that the fire actually produced the heat we certainly cannot work all the way back to a first cause or unmoved mover.²²

Perhaps even more damning for science is the possibility, alluded to above, that God can act without the aid of secondary causes — God can give us the intuition of a star without the star actually existing.²³ This is to say that anything naturally produced can be produced by God without

¹⁸ Etienne Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1938) 69.

¹⁹ Ockham 24.

²⁰ Ockham 41.

²¹ Harry Klocker, *William of Ockham and the Divine Freedom* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1992) 83.

²² Ockham 118-119. Also, Klocker 84.

²³ Ockham 26.

the aid of the secondary cause. The traditional scholastic would allow for natural causality, because even though God in *potentia absoluta* could produce that effect, God limits this absolute power. With Ockham there is no certainty at any moment that what is being intuited corresponds to any actual object of intuition, and the actual cause of an effect is indeterminable. Even the certainty of intuitive cognition itself fails, for there is certainty only that the knower is intuiting something, i.e., that they perceive that Socrates exists and is running, but there is never any way to know that there is a real existent Socrates running and not merely God producing this intuition. Thus even our perceptions of the world and our own psychological states are doubtful. Gilson writes of such a world:

Having expelled from the mind of God the intelligible world of Plato, Ockham was satisfied that no intelligibility could be found in any one of God's works. How could there be order in nature, when there is no nature? And how could there be a nature when each singular being, thing, or event, can claim no other justification for its existence than that of being one among the elect of an all-powerful God?...Instead of being an eternal source of that concrete order of intelligibility and beauty which we call nature, Ockham's God was expressly intended to relieve the world of the necessity of having any meaning of its own.²⁴

Third, the existence of God is a matter of faith alone. Natural theology based on efficient causality is obviously impossible, although Ockham does give some credence to an argument from conservation for God's existence. A thing brought into being must be conserved in its being, and the conserver must also be conserved in its being, but this cannot infinitely regress.²⁵ However, Ockham immediately undercuts this proof by arguing that this argument demonstrates only that there must be a first conserver for this world but we have no certainty that this is the only world. The first conserver, then, cannot be rationally demonstrated to be the only conserver and is thus not God in the sense of being the greatest being.²⁶ In the end Ockham will resort to faith in this matter, and God is known to exist only through faith, for all rational arguments will fail and direct intuition of God is impossible given human finitude.²⁷ As a result,

Ockham destroys the synthesis of faith and reason won by the scholastics. Ockham precludes reason from achieving truth and certainty and only faith remains. A supremely omnipotent God undermines any necessity in the world and also any real intelligibility, leaving the human only faith.

Ockham's intention was to safeguard the dignity of God from limits placed on the divine freedom as a result of the interjection of philosophy into Christianity. Consequently, he rejects much of the philosophical trappings that Christianity has inherited from the Greeks; notions such as the inherent rationality of the cosmos, the rational limits of God's power, and the positive role of reason in discovering and relating to this rational order are shunted aside. Ockham is successful in his attempt to defend God against what he considers to be the encroaching heathen, perhaps too much so, for his success comes at a price. God is omnipotent but perhaps arbitrary. God is free but perhaps nonsensical. God is independent but perhaps unknowable. God has, in a sense, become hyper-transcendent, or virtually meaningless to the human knower and faith alone provides any certainty. Given this situation it is perhaps inevitable, and certainly understandable, that the human will attempt to regain certainty, and since God has cost the world its intelligibility it is understandable that the answer is to replace God with the human as the source of order.

Descartes: The Human Coup

While Descartes (1596-1650) was obviously not immediately involved with Ockham, there can be no doubt as to Ockham's influence on Descartes, even if much of it is tacit. His is the world clouded by the wars and struggles of the Reformation, for Luther, a self-declared Ockhamite, had spoken loudly. Despite Ockham's excommunication, nominalism was to do quite well in the time following Ockham's death. There was a strong presence in England and at the University of Paris, and by Luther's time there was only one university in Germany that was not a school of nominalism.²⁸ Indeed, the Reformers' emphasis on an omnipotent God known through faith and revelation alone owes much of its formation to the influence of nominalism. It is true that the Reformers' God is accessible through revelation, particularly through Christ, but even yet the emphasis on pre-destination demonstrates the arbitrariness of this God.²⁹

²⁴ Gilson, *Unity* 86.

²⁵ Ockham 122-125.

²⁶ Ockham 126-127. See also Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy III: Late Medieval Philosophy* (New York: Image Books, 1993) 83.

²⁷ Klocker 63.

²⁸ Gillespie 24.

²⁹ Gillespie 26.

Even the Counterreformation was influenced by nominalism in its attempt to re-create the Thomistic synthesis of faith and reason. Suarez, whom Descartes studied under the Jesuits, explicitly criticizes Ockham’s position on universals, but in so doing acquiesces to the position that there are “as many categories as individual things,” a semantic distinction that, while retaining a hint of realism, essentially cedes the point by making realism ridiculous.³⁰ While none of this demonstrates that nominalism has a decisive impact on Descartes, there is no doubt that he is aware of the problem.³¹ Far more important than these circumstantial bits of information are elements of Descartes’ philosophy which bear an undeniable similarity to the nominalism of Ockham. Thus, while there is little reason to believe that Descartes took these ideas directly from Ockham, it seems much more likely that Descartes is responding to the crisis that Ockham has created. In this section there are three aspects of Descartes’ thought that bear significant resemblance to Ockham and demonstrate Descartes’ attempt to overcome the quagmire that scholasticism finds itself in, namely, the omnipotence of God, the deceiver God, and the move to certainty found in the self.

Possibilism and the Omnipotent God

There is no doubt that Descartes places great emphasis on the omnipotence of God; so much so that he discusses the situation in much the same manner as Ockham — God has determined eternal laws, but these laws are subject to the will of God and contain no necessity in themselves. In a letter to Mersenne he writes:

The mathematical truths which you call eternal have been laid down by God and depend on him entirely no less than the rest of his creatures...Please do not hesitate to assert and proclaim everywhere that it is God who has laid down these laws in nature just as a king lays down laws in his kingdom...

It will be said that if God has 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...In general we can assert that God can do everything that is beyond our grasp but not that he cannot do what is beyond our grasp. It would be rash to think that our imagination reaches as far as his power.³²

It is thus clear that God has established the eternal laws, and even mathematical facts, like the properties of a triangle, are what they are because God so willed. This is true even of moral postulates, for nothing is good “prior to the decision of the divine will to make it so.”³³ There is, then, no question that God established the eternal truths and is not limited by anything in the decision to establish these truths, and while Descartes in his earlier works attempts to demonstrate that God’s will is in fact unchanging he does hold that God is not dependent on any eternal standard and that God’s actions are not limited by what we can imagine as rational.³⁴ It is thus the case that Descartes begins from a fundamentally similar situation as Ockham, namely, that God is not limited by any standards, for God creates the very standards that might provide limitation — anything is possible. Consequently, everything, even so-called eternal truths, are contingent and might be different; God, too, is seen as potentially arbitrary, without a limiting essence or standard of rationality. This problem is radicalized, by Descartes, in the *Meditations*, where the possibility of a deceiver God is raised.

God the Deceiver Almighty

One of the major problems arising from Ockham’s work is the possibility that with God’s ability to surpass secondary causes intuitions of non-existent objects or psychological states are possible. Descartes, as is well known, struggles with a very similar problem. In the *Meditations* Descartes is putting forth his new method of universal doubt, where he hopes to “raze everything to the ground and begin again,” while withholding assent from opinions “that are not completely certain and indubitable.”³⁵ In this destruction he works through various possibilities: the senses deceive and ought not to be trusted, he might be mad, or he might be dreaming. Nothing, however, is as powerful as his contention that God might be deceiving him; that this omnipotent being is deceiving him at every moment, or perhaps has

Press, 1991) 22-23. See also “Letter to Mersenne, 6 May 1630,” 24; “Letter to Mersenne, 27 May 1630,” 25.

³³ René Descartes, “Objections and Replies,” in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* II, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugold Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) 291.

³⁴ For a wonderful discussion with relevant texts included see Plantinga 95-114. Also Gillespie 30, 31.

³⁵ René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993) 59.

³⁰ Gillespie 27.

³¹ Gillespie 2, 28, 29.

³² René Descartes, “Letter to Mersenne, 15 April 1630,” in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* III, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugold Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny (Cambridge: Cambridge University

made Descartes in such a manner as to always be wrong, or perhaps has made the world in such a fashion that it cannot be understood properly. Even the most basic, and apparently indubitable, propositions such as mathematics are in doubt as a result of this possibility. Of course in *Meditation I* Descartes immediately rejects the possibility, as God is good, and replaces God with the evil genius, but this act of piety is hardly convincing as it seems more of an attempt to escape Galileo's fate than anything. Additionally, there is no reason to think that the evil genius is not God since eternal laws of goodness are subject to God's choice, allowing the possibility that to deceive is good, and since Descartes in *Meditation III* thinks it necessary to tackle the problem again, this time with real argument.

It is the very possibility that God might deceive that is so interesting. It is in the positing of the possibility that makes Descartes unique; others have doubted the senses and the entire tradition is rife with the attitude that things are not quite as they appear, even that appearances are not the same as reality, but only in the sowing of Ockham and the reaping of Descartes is it God who might deceive. Clearly the response to this possibility must be extraordinary, for everything that was once thought constant is now in doubt and no ordinary answer will suffice. Ockham in positing the problem of a deceiver God poses an extraordinary question, but his answer, faith, while destructive of the Thomistic synthesis, is hardly unusual. Descartes encounters the same problem, by now rather ordinary, but posits an extraordinary response, one that places the human subject in a position over God.

Taming God: The Extraordinary Response

It is often thought that the reliability of God is what allows Descartes to escape his dilemma, and indeed it is the case that Descartes uses the reliability of God to then allow the existence of matter. This position argues that reason is not autonomous but is reliable only given the existence and perfection of God.³⁶ There are good reasons for believing this, for matter is derived after the existence of God in the *Meditations*, and Descartes does make claims such as "all things which we very clearly and very distinctly conceive are true ...is certain only because God is or exists."³⁷ However, it

seems apparent that in the *Meditations* this is not the case, but rather God becomes certain only because of the certainty of the cogito. It is in this reversal that Descartes strikes his blow against the terrible God of nominalism and achieves security by positing the supremacy of the human.

First, the demonstration for the existence of God occurs in *Meditation III*, while the certainty of the cogito occurs in *Meditation II*. This priority indicates nothing in itself, but with the cogito comes the indubitable fact that "I am; I exist," and that "thought exists."³⁸ The proof for God's existence rests upon the fact that Descartes has a thought of God, and from this perfect thought Descartes can argue that a cause must have as much reality as the effect and thus the thought of perfection cannot be caused by himself but only by God. But this proof is possible if and only if thought and the subject of thought are indubitable, for if thought and the subject of thought are doubtful then it matters not what causes the thought. Thus, the thought of God is certain before the reality of God is certain, and the proof for God depends upon the certainty of the self. God's certainty is dependent.

Second, Descartes uses the cogito as the mechanism to determine the standard of truth. From the very beginning of the book Descartes has posited that he will not believe anything that is not clear and distinct, but he has not established what clear and distinct means. Consequently, he might not recognize a truth that is clear and distinct, or might consider something clear and distinct when it in fact is not, and he admits that he has made mistakes concerning the standard before. It is with the discovery of the indubitable nature of the cogito that Descartes has a standard, an exemplar, of what a clear and distinct truth actually is, and by this standard he can then judge his subsequent judgments. In the *Discourse on Method* Descartes writes that "since I had just found a proposition that I knew was true, I thought I ought also know in what this certitude consists...I judged that I could take as a general rule that the things we conceive very clearly and very distinctly are true."³⁹ From this general rule Descartes determines the standard of truth and can judge other conceptions according to this standard. Thus, when he then realizes that his concept of God is clear and distinct he knows not only that he is in fact thinking it, but can recognize that his concept is true. By this act God is replaced as the standard of truth, and the human ascends to the throne.

³⁶ Peter A. Schouls, "Descartes and the Autonomy of Reason," in *René Descartes: Critical Assessments I*, ed. Georges J. D. Moyal (New York: Routledge, 1991) 276-277.

³⁷ Descartes, *Discourse* 22.

³⁸ Descartes, *Meditations* 65.

³⁹ Descartes, *Discourse* 19.

Third, even prior to the cogito Descartes is aware that he is free. Reason itself has erred and is capable of falling prey to prejudice and opinion. However, Descartes is certain that he is free to withhold assent and thus not fall into error even while reason has not justified itself and its opinions.⁴⁰ Further, he will claim in *Meditation IV* that the intellect, strictly speaking, makes no errors because it does not judge, while the will is capable of truth or falsity in its judgments, especially when it judges what it does not understand.⁴¹ To be free from error, then, is to withhold judgment until one understands. This claim is remarkable, although understated, in that salvation from error rests in the will, independent of God. Not only that, but Descartes elevates the will so much that "God's faculty of willing does not appear to be any greater" than the human will.⁴² Human will, then, is elevated to the status formerly reserved for God, and it is in exercising this freedom that humans can achieve certainty.

Thus the cogito is the source of certainty, instead of God, and in fact is the necessary condition for the proof of God. Not only that, but God does not provide the means to escape error, but only the new elevated will is capable of either escaping error or discovering truth! Truth is now tied to the subject, both the subject's will and self-certainty, and not on any external standard. God is tied to the human standard of perfection, subject to the human will, known only at the human whim. This God is tamed and subject to the human:

The wildly omnipotent God of nominalism is thus replaced by a God who conforms to human notions of perfection. At the same time and perhaps even more importantly, the human will is conceived as infinite and human freedom is posited as potentially absolute...Man is thus granted the capacity for absolute self-assertion against the natural world and ultimately against God himself.⁴³

An Interpretation

Ockham is motivated by an understandable concern: he considers his God to be threatened by a pagan influence and so rejects those influences. Universals and divine ideas limit the freedom of a God that his faith tells him is omnipotent

and he reacts by keeping the faith and rejecting universals. This comes at no small cost, however, for rationally discoverable order, upon which the Greeks had built their cosmology and ethics and which Christianity had synthesized in Augustine and Aquinas, is lost. No longer is science capable of discovering order, no longer is reason capable of proving the existence of God, and, most dramatically, even God is no longer necessarily rational or concerned with limiting divine freedom to allow us to discover the source of order. Instead God is removed from reason, and open only to faith, and reason discovers only a dark, brooding God capable of exercising will but not of restraining this will. Ockham intends to defend God, but creates a potential tyrant, one capable even of commanding us to hate instead of love.

Descartes discovers himself in a similar situation; an omnipotent God not limited by any rational necessity destroys even the necessity of that which seems most certain — mathematics. As there exists no discoverable source of order, for all order is contingent and capable of being denied by the omnipotent God, Descartes is left with the possibilities of abandoning the quest for rational certainty, in essence bowing to the demands of an omnipotent God, or of finding a new source of certainty and order. He does find this source, in himself, and the subject and the subject's will replaces God as the source of certainty and the guarantor of order. Instead of contemplating the divine order or the order of the cosmos, the theological absolutism created by Ockham forces the human to become absolute.⁴⁴

Much has been said of Descartes' importance to the creation of modernity, but what needs to be recognized is that the medieval solution crumbles under its own demands. By creating an arbitrary God there is no option left but the rejection of reason or the utter elevation of reason and will, and this, as has often been said, is the salient feature of modernity. It is also this feature that offers a possible explanation, although not necessarily the sole explanation, of the prevalence of atheism after Descartes: not only has God become unnecessary, but God is actually a detriment to human well-being. If this interpretation is correct, it is perfectly understandable why God would be rejected, for God is no longer even desirable, and it is understandable why God is rejected with such vengeance by a Voltaire or a Nietzsche. Ockham creates an idol that threatens the welfare of humanity, and it is quite apparent why humanity will then attempt the destruction of this idol.

⁴⁰ Descartes, *Meditations* 59. Also, Peter A. Schouls, "The Primacy of Freewill over Reason," in *René Descartes: Critical Assessments I*, ed. Georges J. D. Moyal (New York: Routledge, 1991) 292.

⁴¹ Descartes, *Meditations* 84, 85.

⁴² Descartes, *Meditations* 82.

⁴³ Gillespie 62.

⁴⁴ Blumenberg 139, 178.