

Eternal Truths Passages

1. To Mersenne, 15 April 1630. AT I, 145-146 = K, 11-12 = C III, 23.0-23.7.

metaphysical topics and especially the following. 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. Indeed to say that these truths are independent of God is to talk of him as if he were Jupiter or Saturn and to subject him to the Styx and the Fates. 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. There is no single one that we cannot grasp if our mind turns to consider it. They are all 'inborn in our minds' just as a king would imprint his laws on the hearts of all his subjects if he had enough power to do so. The greatness of God, on the other hand, is something which we cannot grasp even though we know it. But the very fact that we judge it beyond our grasp makes us esteem it the more greatly; just as a king has more majesty when he is less familiarly known by his subjects, provided of course that they do not get the idea that they have no king – they must know him enough to be in no doubt about that.

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 judgement about God. 'But his will is free.' – Yes, but his power is beyond our grasp. In general we can assert that God can do everything that is within our grasp but not that he cannot do what is beyond our grasp. It would be rash to think that our imagination reaches as far as his power.

I hope to put this in writing, within the next fortnight, in my treatise on physics; but I do not want you to keep it secret. On the contrary I beg you to tell people as often as the occasion demands, provided you do not mention my name. I should be glad to know the objections which can be made against this view; and I want people to 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.

- "mathematical" and "eternal" truths laid down by God & depend on him. To say they're independent of him is to treat him as Jupiter or Saturn: subject to the Styx & the Fates

- ET's "inborn" in our minds

- we cannot grasp the greatness of God

- God can change ET's if his will can change

- But He is eternal & unchangeable

- His will is free, but His power is beyond our grasp

- Suggests agnostic position: We can assert that He can do whatever is within our grasp but not that he cannot do what is beyond our grasp; this would be rash

- Goal: Get people to speak of God in a worthier manner: reject the almost universal way of imagining him as a finite being

2. To Mersenne, 6 May 1630. AT I, 149-150 = K, 13-14 = C III, 24.7-25.3.

As for the eternal truths, I say once more that 'they are true or possible only because God knows them as true or possible. They are not known as true by God in any way which would imply that they are true independently of him'. If men really understood the sense of their words they could never say without blasphemy that the truth of anything is prior to the knowledge which God has of it. In God willing and knowing are a single thing in such a way that 'by the very fact of willing something he knows it and it is only for this reason that such a thing is true'. So we must not say that 'if God did not exist nevertheless these truths would be true'; for the existence of God is the first and the most eternal of all possible truths and the one from which alone all others proceed. It is easy to be mistaken about this because most people do not regard God as a being who is infinite and

beyond our grasp, the sole author on whom all things depend; they stick at the syllables of his name and think it sufficient knowledge of him to know that 'God' means what is meant by *Deus* in Latin and what is adored by men. Those who have no higher thoughts than these can easily become atheists; and because they perfectly comprehend mathematical truths and do not perfectly comprehend the truth of God's existence, it is no wonder they do not think the former depend on the latter. But they should rather take the opposite view, that since God is a cause whose power surpasses the bounds of human understanding, and since the necessity of these truths does not exceed our knowledge, these truths are therefore something less than, and subject to, the incomprehensible power of God. What you say about the production of the *Word* does not conflict, I think, with what I say; but I do not want to involve myself in theology, and I am already afraid that you will think my philosophy too free-thinking for daring to express an opinion on such lofty matters.

- ET's are true or possible only because God knows them as true or possible

- Not known by God in any way that would imply they're true independently of Him

- God's knowing = God's willing

- ^{True}only because He wills/knows it is it true

- existence of God the first & most eternal truth; all others proceed from it

- Cause for error: Don't regard God as being beyond our grasp

- Arg. that these truths are less than & subject to God's power; denied by others because they comprehend them perfectly but do not perfectly comprehend God's existence

3. To Mersenne, 27 May 1630. AT I, 151-153 = K, 14-15 = C III, 25.4-26.0.

You ask me 'by what kind of causality God established the eternal truths'. I reply: 'by the same kind of causality' as he created all things, that is to say, as their 'efficient and total cause'. 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. I do not conceive them as emanating from God like rays from the sun; but I know that God is the author of everything and that these truths are something and consequently that he is their author. I say that I know this, not that I conceive it or grasp it; because it is possible to know that God is infinite and all powerful although our soul, being finite, cannot grasp or conceive him. In the same way we can touch a mountain with our hands but we cannot put our arms around it as we could put them around a tree or something else not too large for them. To grasp something is to embrace it in one's thought; to know something, it is sufficient to touch it with one's thought.

You ask also what necessitated God to create these truths; and I reply that he was free to make it not true that all the radii of the circle are equal – just as free as he was not to create the world. And it is certain that these truths are no more necessarily attached to his essence than are other created things. You ask what God did in order to produce them. I reply that 'from all eternity he willed and understood them to be, and by that very fact he created them'. Or, if you reserve the word 'created' for the existence of things, then he 'established them and made them'. In God,

willing, understanding and creating are all the same thing without one being prior to the other 'even conceptually'.

-God established ET's by being their efficient & total cause

-ET's are essences of created things; & God is the author of creatures' essences as well as of their existence

-God is author of everything; ET's are something; ∴ God author of ET's

-I know this but don't conceive it or grasp it

-mountain/tree analogy to illustrate touch/grasp distinction: touching is suff. for knowing

-God free to make an ET not true

-God produced, created, established ET's by willing & understanding them to be

-willing = understanding = creating in God; none even conceptually prior to another

4. To Mersenne, 27 (K: 17) May 1638. AT II, 138 = K, 55 = C III, 102.9-103.2.

-if God had created nothing, ET's wd not be T's

... 2. You ask whether there would be real space, as there is now, if God had created nothing. At first this question seems to be beyond the capacity

of the human mind, like infinity, so that it would be unreasonable to discuss it; but in fact I think that it is merely beyond the capacity of our imagination, like the questions of the existence of God and of the human soul. I believe that our intellect can reach the truth of the matter, which is, in my opinion, that not only would there not be any space, but even those truths which are called eternal – as that 'the whole is greater than its part' – would not be truths if God had not so established, as I think I wrote you once before'...

5. Replies Five. AT VII, 380 = HR II, 226 = C II, 261.2-261.6.

You say that you think it is 'very hard' to propose that there is anything immutable and eternal apart from God.² You would be right to think this if I was talking about existing things, or if I was proposing something as immutable in the sense that its immutability was independent of God. But just as the poets suppose that the Fates were originally established by Jupiter, but that after they were established he bound himself to abide by them, so I do not think that the essences of things, and the mathematical truths which we can know concerning them, are independent of God. Nevertheless I do think that they are immutable and eternal, since the will and decree of God willed and decreed that they should be so. Whether you think this is hard or easy to accept, it is enough for me that it is true.

-Jupiter/Fates analogy: J bound himself to abide by F's; likewise MT's not independent of God.

-essences & MT's are not independent of God

-but are immutable & eternal b/c God willed & decreed them to be so

6. Replies Six. a. AT VII, 431-432 = HR II, 248 = C II, 291.5-292.2.

6. As for the freedom of the will,¹ the way in which it exists in God is quite different from the way in which it exists in us. It is self-contradictory to suppose that the will of God was not indifferent from eternity with respect to everything which has happened or will ever happen; for it is impossible to imagine that anything is thought of in the divine intellect as good or true, or worthy of belief or action or omission, prior to the decision of the divine will to make it so. I am not speaking here of temporal priority: I mean that there is not even any priority of order, or nature, or of 'rationally determined reason' as they call it, such that God's idea of the good impelled him to choose one thing rather than another. For example, God did not will the creation of the world in time because he saw that it would be better this way than if he had created it from eternity; nor did he will that the three angles of a triangle should be equal to two right angles because he recognized that it could not be otherwise, and so on. On the contrary, it is because he willed to create the world in time that it is better this way than if he had created it from eternity; and it is because he willed that the three angles of a triangle should necessarily equal two right angles that this is true and cannot be otherwise; and so on in other cases. There is no problem in the fact that the merit of the saints may be said to be the cause of their obtaining eternal life; for it is not the cause of this reward in the sense that it

¹ Above pp. 280f.

determines God to will anything, but is merely the cause of an effect of which God willed from eternity that it should be the cause. Thus the supreme indifference to be found in God is the supreme indication of his omnipotence. But as for man, since he finds that the nature of all

-self-contradictory to suppose that the will of God was not indifferent from eternity with respect to everything that has happened or will happen

-God's idea of good not prior in order to & did not impel his choosing of one thing over another

-Did not will the creation in time b/c He saw this wd be better than creating from eternity

-Rather, b/c he willed it, it's better

-Did not will triangle thrm. b/c he recognized it could not be otherwise

-Rather, b/c He willed the nec. of triangle thrm., it is true & cannot be otherwise

-God's supreme indifference is the supreme indication of His omnipotence

b. AT VII, 434-435 = HR II, 250 = C II, 293.4-293.6.

separately in this way is a substance, not an accident. The claim that real accidents cannot be separated from their subjects 'naturally', but only by the power of God, is irrelevant. For to occur 'naturally' is nothing other than to occur through the ordinary power of God, which in no way differs from his extraordinary power - the effect on the real world is exactly the same. Hence if everything which can naturally exist without a subject is a substance, anything that can exist without a substance even through the power of God, however extraordinary, should also be termed a substance. I do admit that one substance can be attributed to

-to occur 'naturally' is the same as to occur by the ordinary power of God

-the ordinary power of God does not differ from His extraordinary power

-everything which can exist w/o a substance even through the ext. power of God is a subst.

c. AT VII, 435-436 = HR II, 250-251 = C II, 293.9-294.8.

8. If anyone attends to the immeasurable greatness of God he will find it manifestly clear that there can be nothing whatsoever which does not depend on him.³ This applies not just to everything that subsists, but to

all order, every law, and every reason for anything's being true or good. If this were not so, then, as noted a little earlier, God would not have been completely indifferent with respect to the creation of what he did in fact create. If some reason for something's being good had existed prior to his preordination, this would have determined God to prefer those things which it was best to do. But on the contrary, just because he resolved to prefer those things which are now to be done, for this very reason, in the words of Genesis, 'they are very good'; in other words, the reason for their goodness depends on the fact that he exercised his will to make them so. There is no need to ask what category of causality is applicable to the dependence of this goodness upon God, or to the dependence on him of other truths, both mathematical and metaphysical. For since the various kinds of cause were enumerated by thinkers who did not, perhaps, attend to this type of causality, it is hardly surprising that they gave no name to it. But in fact they did give it a name, for it can be called efficient causality, in the sense that a king may be called the efficient cause of a law, although the law itself is not a thing which has physical existence, but is merely what they call a 'moral entity'. Again, there is no need to ask how God could have brought it about from eternity that it was not true that twice four make eight, and so on; for I admit this is unintelligible to us. Yet on the other hand I do understand, quite correctly, that there cannot be any class of entity that does not depend on God; I also understand that it would have been easy for God to ordain certain things such that we men cannot understand the possibility of their being otherwise than they are. And therefore it would be irrational for us to doubt what we do understand correctly just because there is something which we do not understand and which, so far as we can see, there is no reason why we should understand. Hence we should not suppose that eternal truths 'depend on the human intellect or on other existing things';¹ they depend on God alone, who, as the supreme legislator, has ordained them from eternity.

³ Cf. above p. 281.

¹ Cf. above p. 281.

-there can be nothing whatsoever which does not depend on God

-God's willing things ^{is} prior to their goodness

-God the efficient cause of mathematical & metaphysical truths; like a king is the efficient cause of a law

-unintelligible to us how God could have made it not true that $2 \times 4 = 8$

-but there can be no class of entity that doesn't depend on God (even moral entities)

-God could easily have ordained "certain things such that we men cannot understand the possibility of their being otherwise than they are."

-ET's depend on God alone & not on the human intellect or on other existing things.

7. To Hyperaspistes, August 1641. AT III, 429-430 = K, 115-116 = C III, 193.6-194.5.

7. I say first that in Bologna spart¹ the light of the sun is not preserved, but the sun's rays kindle a new light which can afterwards be seen in shadow. Secondly, it would not follow that anything can be kept in being without the influence of God, for truths may often be illustrated by a false example, and it is much more certain that nothing can exist without the concurrence of God than that there can be no sunlight without the sun. There is no doubt that if God withdrew his concurrence, everything which he has created would immediately go to nothing; because all things were nothing until God created them and lent them his concurrence. This does not mean that they should not be called substances, because when we call a created substance self-subsistent we do not rule out the divine concurrence² which it needs in order to subsist. We mean only that it is the kind of thing that can exist without any other created thing; and this is something

that cannot be said about the modes of things, like shape and number. It is not the case that God would be showing the immensity of his power if he made things which could exist without him later on; on the contrary, he would thus be showing that his power was finite, since things once created would no longer depend on him. I agree that it is impossible that God should destroy anything except by withdrawing his concurrence, because otherwise he would be tending towards non-being by a positive activity. But in admitting that, I am not falling into any trap of my own devising. For there is a great difference between what happens by God's positive activity and what results from the cessation of his positive activity: the former cannot be anything but excellent, and the latter includes evils and sins and the destruction of some being, if any existent being is ever destroyed.

There is no force in what you say about the nature of a triangle.³ As I have insisted in several places, when God or the infinite is in question, we must consider not what we can comprehend – for we know that they are quite beyond our comprehension – but only what conclusions we can reach by an argument that is certain. To find what kind of causal dependence these truths have on God, see my replies to the Sixth Objections, article 8.²

-despite their dependence on God's concurrence, we can still call things substances, b/c when we call something self-subsistent we do not rule out the divine concurrence; it needs to subsist. We mean only that it can exist w/o other created things

-God wd not be showing the immensity of His power if he made things which could exist w/o Him later on; rather, he wd be showing that His power was finite, since things once created wd no longer depend on Him

-impossible that God should destroy anything except by withdrawing his concurrence, b/c then he would be tending towards non-being by a positive activity

-when God or the infinite is in question, don't go by what we can comprehend, but only what conclusions we can reach by an argument that is certain

¹ Hyperaspistes had argued against Descartes' doctrine of the free creation of eternal truths. 'Let God do whatever he can; let us suppose *per impossibile*, that he never thought of a triangle; yet suppose you are in the world as you now are: would you not agree that it was true that the three angles of a triangle equal two right angles?'

8. To Mesland, 2 May 1644. AT IV, 118-119 = K, 150-151 = C III, 235.0-235.7.

I turn to the difficulty of conceiving how God would have been acting freely and indifferently if he had made it false that the three angles of a triangle were equal to two right angles, or in general that contradictories could not be true together. It is easy to dispel this difficulty by considering that the power of God cannot have any limits, and that our mind is finite and so created as to be able to conceive as possible the things which God has wished to be in fact possible, but not be able to conceive as possible things which God could have made possible, but which he has nevertheless wished to make impossible. The first consideration shows us that God cannot have been determined to make it true that contradictories cannot be true together, and therefore that he could have done the opposite. The second consideration assures us that even if this be true, we should not try to comprehend it, since our nature is incapable of doing so. And even if God has willed that some truths should be necessary, this does not mean that he willed them necessarily; for it is one thing to will that they be necessary, and quite another to will this necessarily, or to be necessitated to will it. I agree that there are contradictions which are so evident that we cannot put them before our minds without judging them entirely impossible, like the one which you suggest: 'that God might have brought it about that his creatures were independent of him'. But if we would know the immensity of his power we should not put these thoughts before our minds, nor should we conceive any precedence or priority between his intellect and his will; for the idea which we have of God teaches us that there is in him only a single activity, entirely simple and entirely pure. This is well expressed by the words of St Augustine: 'They are so because thou see'st them to be so';¹ because in God *seeing* and *willing* are one and the same thing.

-Our mind is finite and so created as to be able to conceive as possible the things which God has wished in fact to be possible, but not be able to conceive as possible things which God could have made possible, but which he has nevertheless wished to make impossible.

-God cannot have been determined to make it true that contradictories cannot be true together, and therefore he could have done the opposite

-We should not try to comprehend this, since we are incapable of doing so

-Even if God has willed that some truths should be necessary, this does not mean that he willed them necessarily; for it is one thing to will that they be necessary, and quite another to will this necessarily, or to be necessitated to will it

-There are contradictions which are so evident that we cannot put them before our minds w/o judging them entirely impossible, like that God should make creatures be independent of Him

-But if we knew the immensity of His power, we should not put them before our minds

-No priority between God's intellect & His will; in God seeing = willing

9. To Arnauld, 29 July 1648. AT V, 223-224 = K, 236-237 = C III, 358.7.359.2.

6. The difficulty in recognizing the impossibility of a vacuum seems to arise primarily because we do not sufficiently consider that nothing can have no properties; otherwise, seeing that there is true extension in the space we call empty, and consequently all the properties necessary for the nature of body, we would not say that it was wholly empty, that is, mere nothingness. Secondly, it arises because we have recourse to the divine power: knowing this to be infinite, we attribute to it an effect without noticing that the effect involves a contradictory conception, that is, is inconceivable by us. But I do not think that we should ever say of anything that it cannot be brought about by God. For since every basis of truth and goodness depends on his omnipotence, I would not dare to say that God cannot make a mountain without a valley, or bring it about that 1 and 2 are not 3. I merely say that he has given me such a mind that I cannot conceive a mountain without a valley, or a sum of 1 and 2 which is not 3; such things involve a contradiction in my conception. I think the same should be said of a space which is wholly empty, or of an extended piece of nothing, or of a limited universe; because no limit to the world can be imagined without its being understood that there is extension beyond it; and no barrel can be conceived to be so empty as to have inside it no extension, and therefore no body; for wherever extension is, there, of necessity, is body also.

-The difficulty in recognizing the impossibility of a vacuum arises b/c of God's power: Knowing it to be infinite, we attribute to it an effect w/o noticing that the effect involves a contradictory conception, that is, is inconceivable by us

-We should never say of anything that it cannot be brought about by God

-I would not dare to say that God cannot make a mountain w/o a valley, or make $1+2 \neq 3$

-I merely say that I cannot conceive them, that such things involve a contradiction in my conception

-The same should be said of a vacuum

-Wherever extension is, there of necessity is body also

10. To More, 5 February 1649. AT V, 272-274 = K, 240-242 = C III, 363.1-364.2.

But you are quite ready to admit that in the natural course of events there is no vacuum: you are concerned about God's power, which you think can take away the contents of a container while preventing its sides from meeting. For my part, I know that my intellect is finite and God's power is infinite, and so I set no limits to it; I consider only what I am capable of perceiving, and what not, and I take great pains that my judgement should accord with my perception. And so I boldly assert that God can do everything which I perceive to be possible, but I am not so bold as to assert the converse, namely that he cannot do what conflicts with my conception of things—I merely say that it involves a contradiction. And so, since I see that it conflicts with my way of conceiving things for all body to be taken out of a container and for there to remain an extension which I conceive in no way differently than I previously conceived the body contained in it, I say that it involves a contradiction that such an extension should remain there after the body has been taken away. I conclude that the sides of the container must come together. This is altogether in accord with my other opinions. For I say elsewhere¹ that all motion is in a manner circular; from which it follows that it cannot be distinctly understood that God should remove some body from a container unless we understand at the same time that another body, or the sides of the container, should move into its place by a circular motion.

3. In the same way I say that it involves a contradiction that there should be any atoms which are conceived as extended and at the same time indivisible.² Though God might make them such that they could not be divided by any creature, we certainly cannot understand that he might deprive himself of the power of dividing them. Your comparison with things which have been done and cannot be undone is not to the point. For we do not take it as a mark of impotence when someone cannot do something which we do not understand to be possible, but only when he cannot do something which we distinctly perceive to be possible. Now we certainly perceive it to be possible for an atom to be divided, since we suppose it to be extended; and so, if we judge that it cannot be divided by God, we shall judge that God cannot do one of the things which we perceive to be possible. But we do not in the same way perceive it to be possible for what is done to be undone—on the contrary, we perceive it to be altogether impossible, and so it is no defect of power in God not to do it.

The case is different with the divisibility of matter; for though I cannot count all the parts into which it is divisible (and which I say are on that account indefinite in number), yet I cannot assert that their division by God could never be completed, because I know that God can do more things than I can encompass within my thought. Indeed I agreed in article 34³ that such indefinite division of certain parts of matter sometimes actually takes place.

1 Cf. *Principles*, Part II, art. 34: AT VIII A 59; CSM I 239.

2 Cf. *Principles*, Part II, art. 20: AT VIII A 51; CSM I 231.

-Can't God make a vacuum?

-I set no limits to God's power

-I boldly assert that God can do everything I can perceive to be possible, but I am not so bold as to assert that He cannot do what conflicts with my conception of things—I merely say that it involves a contradiction

-I say that atoms & vacuums involve contradictions

-We cannot understand that God might deprive himself of the power of dividing atoms

-We do not take it as a mark of impotence when someone cannot do something which we do not understand to be possible, but only when he cannot do something which we distinctly perceive to be possible

-We perceive that to make what is done be undone is altogether impossible, and so it is no defect in God's power not to do it