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Adriaenssen, Han Thomas

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## ARTICLE

# THE RADICAL CARTESIANISM OF ROBERT DESGABETS AND THE SCHOLASTIC HERITAGE<sup>1</sup>

Han Thomas Adriaenssen

Robert Desgabets (1610–1678) has been described as a ‘radical Cartesian’. Drawing conclusions from Descartes’s thought that Descartes himself had failed to see, Desgabets treated Cartesianism as a work in progress that awaited further enrichment and development. But, as scholars have recognized, Desgabets’s writings also betray a significant indebtedness to scholastic tradition. In presenting his philosophy, Desgabets often appeals to traditional notions, breathing new life into scholastic concepts and ideas. This paper investigates what we are to make of the scholastic vestiges in Desgabets’s thought. It argues that Desgabets’s relation to scholastic tradition is more complicated than Desgabets himself wants us to believe, or than his modern commentators have recognized. Scholastic echoes in Desgabets cannot be taken at face value. Sometimes, they reflect basic points of agreement with scholastic theories. But just as often, scholastic formulae in Desgabets are vehicles for expressing philosophical views that go way beyond anything to be found in his predecessors.

**KEYWORDS:** Desgabets; intentionality; scholasticism; Cartesianism

The Benedictine theologian Robert Desgabets (1610–78) used to be best known for his defence of Malebranche against the criticism of the French sceptic Simon Foucher (see Watson, *Breakdown of Cartesianism*, 79–82). In recent years, however, scholars have increasingly been recognizing the importance of Desgabets as an autonomous and original thinker who contributed much more to seventeenth-century Cartesianism than a moderately successful defence of Malebranche, and who was rightly described by his

<sup>1</sup>I owe gratitude to two anonymous referees for this journal for their detailed and very helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper. Thanks also to audiences in Groningen and Mainz for their comments and questions on earlier drafts.

contemporary Pierre-Sylvain Régis as ‘one of the greatest metaphysicians of our time’.<sup>2</sup> This is thanks primarily to Tad Schmaltz’s *Radical Cartesianism*. In this study, Desgabets is portrayed alongside Régis as one of the most important ‘radical Cartesians’ of his time. According to radical Cartesians such as Desgabets, Cartesianism is ‘a work in progress’ that awaits further development and enrichment (*Radical Cartesianism*, 11).

But if Desgabets throughout his writings emphatically stresses his admiration for, and debt to, Descartes, some parts of his thought nevertheless seem difficult to square with Descartes’s philosophy. This holds true in particular for Desgabets’s so-called intentionality principle.<sup>3</sup> This principle, which takes centre stage in Desgabets’s philosophy, states that it is impossible for us to think of anything that lacks real being outside of the mind. As we will see below, Desgabets connects this principle with the Cartesian theory of creation. But though he thus takes the intentionality principle to be related to a tenet of Descartes’s thought, he also acknowledges that it sits somewhat uneasily with other aspects of Cartesian philosophy. In particular, Desgabets recognizes that the principle that whatever we think of has being outside of thought fits uneasily with the kind of ‘general doubt concerning the things we think and speak about that is the subject of the first Meditation’ (*Supplément*, 178).<sup>4</sup>

It is no surprise, then, that scholars have looked to other sources than Descartes to come to grips with Desgabets’s intentionality principle. According to Emmanuel Faye, for instance, Desgabets’s intentionality principle should be seen as evidence of a scholastic rather than Cartesian line of thought in Desgabets’s philosophy. Indeed, Faye points out, Desgabets explicitly relates his principle to the scholastic truism that ‘the first operation of the intellect is always true’, and he harkens back to ‘the subtle Scotus’ and other medieval philosophers in spelling out the implications of his view. Moreover, both Faye and Schmaltz suggest that Desgabets’s intentionality principle should be seen as an echo of the medieval view that so-called intuitive cognitions need to have actually existent objects outside of thought (Schmaltz, *Radical Cartesianism*, 137–8; Faye, ‘Cartesianism of Desgabets’, 203). Against the background of such implicit and explicit echoes of scholasticism, Faye argues, it appears that Desgabets’s intentionality principle owes more to scholasticism than to Descartes. Generally, indeed, we

<sup>2</sup>See, for instance, Schmaltz, *Radical Cartesianism*; Cook, ‘Robert Desgabets’s Representation Principle’; ‘Desgabets on the Creation’; Faye, ‘Cartesianism of Desgabets’; Miller, ‘Desgabets on Cartesian Minds’; Nicolas, ‘Substance et Tout-Puissance divine’. In Franco-phone scholarship, the importance of Desgabets has been recognized for a longer time. See, for instance, Beaudé’s ‘Cartésianisme et anticartésianisme’ and the discussion of Desgabets in Rodis-Lewis’s ‘Polémiques’. For Régis’s description of Desgabets, see *L’usage*, 328.

<sup>3</sup>The term is Schmaltz’s (*Radical Cartesianism*, 51).

<sup>4</sup>For the *Supplément à la philosophie de Monsieur Descartes* and the *Traité de l’indéfectibilité des créatures*, page numbers refer to Desgabets’s *Oeuvres philosophiques inédites*. All translations from French and Latin are my own.

may have to view Desgabets less as a Cartesian than as a thinker who was ‘molded by the questions and disputations of late Scholasticism’ (‘Cartesianism of Desgabets’, 204).

In this paper, I will re-examine the use Desgabets makes of scholastic concepts and ideas in presenting and defending his intentionality principle. In particular, I will argue that Desgabets’s relation to scholasticism here is more complicated than his modern commentators have recognized. Desgabets’s intentionality principle is, despite seeming similarities, very different from the position in thinkers like Scotus that intuitive cognitions require actually existent objects. Also, Desgabets’s relation to tradition is more problematic than Desgabets himself wants us to think. For when he marshals scholastic views in support of his own philosophy, Desgabets often gives markedly unorthodox interpretations of these views. And when he spells out his own ideas in traditional terms, these terms mean something different in his mouth than that of his predecessors. In the end, then, even though Desgabets draws on both Descartes’s philosophy and scholastic tradition in laying out his intentionality principle, that principle may be neither unproblematically ‘Cartesian’ nor ‘scholastic’.

I will proceed as follows. First, I introduce the intentionality principle in a bit more detail, and I explain how it differs from the late-medieval position that intuitions require actually existent objects. At the end of the first section, I raise a problem for the intentionality principle. In the second and third sections of this paper, I show how Desgabets addresses this problem by drawing on and remoulding scholastic ideas.

### DESGABETS’S INTENTIONALITY PRINCIPLE

According to Desgabets’s intentionality principle, it is impossible to have a thought unless its object has real being outside of the mind. Whenever we think of something, ‘the thing of which we think has real being outside of thought’ (*Supplément*, 171). For every thought I engage in, in other words, there currently is an ‘original outside of thought’ (*Supplément*, 225).<sup>5</sup>

As we will see, Desgabets explicitly connects this claim to traditional theories and concepts. But Faye and Schmaltz have also recognized in it a more implicit echo of scholastic philosophy. In particular, they have claimed that Desgabets’s intentionality principle is akin to the view in some late-medieval thinkers that intuitive cognitions presuppose actually existent objects. The most prominent defender of this view was the thirteenth-century theologian Duns Scotus. Scotus defined intuitive cognitions as non-propositional cognitions that represent existent objects as existent. Ordinary sense-perception was the paradigm case of intuition, but Scotus

<sup>5</sup>As we will see, however, by ‘thought’, Desgabets strictly speaking appears to mean ‘simple conception’. See *Critique*, 58.

also allowed for intellectual intuitive cognitions. Intuitive cognitions were contrasted with abstractive cognitions: non-propositional acts of cognition that fail to represent existent objects as existent. Abstractive cognitions thus either represent non-existent objects, or, if they represent an existent object, they do not represent it as something that actually exists. Paradigm cases of abstractive cognition include acts of memory and imagination.<sup>6</sup>

Scotus's distinction between intuition and abstraction proved highly influential throughout the later Middle Ages. Thus, Faye rightly draws attention to the fourteenth-century philosopher Francis of Meyronnes, according to whom 'the non-existent cannot be intuited'.<sup>7</sup> And in the fourteenth-century thinker Robert Holcot, one finds the claim that 'an intuitive cognition cannot be about something that does not exist'. As Holcot specified, not even God could bring about an intuition of a non-existent object, as any cognition lacking an external referent would *ipso facto* fall short of intuition.<sup>8</sup>

At first, these claims may sound rather like Desgabets's claim that every thought requires an object. Nevertheless, they are importantly different from it. This becomes clear from the way in which Desgabets argues for his principle. For according to Desgabets, the mere intentionality of thought shows that the object of every thought needs to have extramental being. All our thoughts, Desgabets believes, are thoughts of something, and there would be a 'great absurdity in speaking of a thought of nothing, an idea of nothing, known nothingness, etcetera'. But then, we can only think of something if there actually is something to think about. Therefore, a thought that lacks an 'original outside of thought' really is not a thought at all (*Supplément*, 225).

What this argument shows is that Desgabets's intentionality principle has a much broader scope than medieval claims to the effect that intuitive cognitions require external objects. For while Scotus, Meyronnes and Holcot merely held that one class of cognitive acts needed to have actually existent

<sup>6</sup>Aliqua ergo cognitio est per se existentis, sicut quae attingit obiectum in sua propria existentia actuali. Exemplum de visione coloris, et communiter in sensatione sensus exterioris Aliqua etiam est cognitio obiecti, non ut existentis in se, sed vel obiectum non existit, vel saltem illa cognitio non est eius, ut actualiter existentis. Exemplum, ut imaginatio coloris. (*Quodlibet* XIII [Wadding 25, 521a])

<sup>7</sup>According to Meyronnes, 'non-existens non potest intueri' (Etzkorn, 'Franciscus de Mayronis', 16). Surprisingly, Faye claims that Scotus allowed for intuitions of non-existents ('Cartesianism of Desgabets', 203).

<sup>8</sup>'... videtur quod notitia intuitiva non possit esse non existentis ... Et ideo eadem, si conservetur miraculose, re destructa, iam non erit notitia intuitiva' (Muckle, 'Utrum theologia sit scientia', 130). Outside of Scotist circles, however, philosophers such as William Ockham and Peter Auriol would redefine the concept of intuition so as to loosen the connection between intuitions and actually existent objects. For an extensive discussion, see Day, *Intuitive Cognition*.

objects, Desgabets claimed that the object of every thought needs to have real being outside of thought. This includes the thoughts that the medieval thinkers discussed above would have classified as abstractive rather than intuitive. According to Desgabets's principle, after all, acts of the imagination require objects with real extramental being in virtue of their intentionality. For Scotus, Meyronnes and Holcot, however, acts of imagination classify as abstractive cognitions, which do not require actually existent objects outside of thought.

Now that its import is a bit clearer, a problem for Desgabets's intentionality principle readily presents itself. For surely we can think of many things that are perhaps possible, but not actual. Indeed, Desgabets is happy to allow for thoughts of Caesar, enchanted palaces, and golden mountains (*Critique*, 66; *Supplément*, 237–8). But then, how can such unactual possibilities have real extramental being when I think of them, as the intentionality principle requires? Moreover, it seems that we can not only think of unactual possibilities, but also of entirely impossible objects. Desgabets thinks that mountains without valleys and a physical God are examples of such objects (*Supplément*, 226). Yet, his intentionality principle appears to commit him to their existence.

But as we will see in the next section, Desgabets denies that his principle commits him to the existence of mountains without valleys or a physical God. Impossibilia, he argues, fall outside of the scope of his principle, which, properly understood and restricted, will be seen to amount to no more than a scholastic truism. As for Caesar, enchanted palaces and golden mountains, Desgabets holds that, despite appearances, these objects do have real being outside of our thoughts. To explain what kind of being, we will find him invoking ontological notions that he claims go back to 'the subtle Scotus, Henry of Ghent, Auriol, and some others' (*Traité*, 26). His use of these notions, as well as his claim that the intentionality principle really amounts to a scholastic truism, make the question of how exactly Desgabets draws on traditional sources all the more pertinent.

## IMPOSSIBILIA

To deal with impossibilia such as the physical God and a mountain with no valley, Desgabets draws a distinction between simple conception and judgement. Now, his intentionality principle, Desgabets submits, 'extends only to simple conception' (*Supplément*, 226). Indeed, he appears to think that, properly speaking, 'thought is simple conception in being just thought without any judgment' (Cook, 'Desgabets's Representation Principle', 193; see also *Critique*, 58). But despite appearances, mountains without valleys and physical Gods are not objects of simple conception. Rather, we cognitively engage with them in virtue of (unconscious) judgements to

the effect that certain natures are compatible that really are not (*Supplément*, 226). Consequently, our capacity to entertain a valley-less mountain or a material deity does not provide a counterexample to the claim that the object of every thought has extramental being.

The distinction here between conception and judgement, Desgabets explains, coincides with the scholastic distinction between the intellect's first and second operation (*Critique*, 56). And indeed, for thinkers such as Thomas Aquinas, the first operation of the intellect was to simply conceive of something's nature or essence, while its second operation consisted in the composition and division of conceptions so as to form judgements and propositions (see his *Expositio peryermenias* 1.1.3 [*Opera* 1\*1, 14]). Thus, Desgabets's intentionality principle can be reformulated as follows: the object of the intellect's first operation always has being outside of thought. And when the principle is couched in this scholastic terminology, Desgabets intimates, its truth will appear more easily. After all, as he points out in the *Critique de la Critique*, 'everyone agrees that the intellect's first operation, that is, simple conception, is always true and conforms to its object' (*Critique*, 56). And two pages later, we read that

this single and simple truth, which one is taught when first introduced to logic, namely, that the first operation of the mind always conforms with its object, that is, that it is impossible to think of nothing, totally destroys Pyrrhonism.

Desgabets's claim that 'everyone' agrees that the intellect's first operation is always 'true and conforms to its object' arguably is overstated.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, it is true that the infallibility of simple conception had, in one form or another, been embraced by a broad variety of thinkers from different traditions. To mention just a few examples, Thomas Aquinas maintained that, properly speaking, 'there is no falsity' in the intellect's first operation, and Francisco Suárez argued that 'properly speaking, there is no falsity in a simple concept', and that 'a simple apprehension or cognition cannot have deformity with the thing that is its object'. Therefore, 'there can be no falsity in it'.<sup>10</sup> According to the Jesuit authors of the Coimbrian textbooks, indeed, this was 'the common and true view'.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup>According to Suárez, the universal truth of simple conceptions had been challenged by 'non-nulli moderni'. *Disputationes Metaphysicae* 9.1.2 (*Opera* 25, 312b).

<sup>10</sup>Aquinas: 'una operationum intellectus est, secundum quod intelligit indivisibilia, puta cum intelligit hominem aut bovem, aut aliquid huiusmodi incomplexorum. Et haec intelligentia est in his circa quae non est falsum' (*Sententia de anima* 3.5. *Opera* 45.1, 224). Suárez: '... falsitas proprie non reperitur in simplici conceptu', and 'simplex apprehensio seu cognitio non potest habere difformitatem cum re quae est obiectum eius, ... ergo non potest in illa esse falsitas' (*Disputationes Metaphysicae* 8.3.8 [*Opera* 25, 285b] and 9.1.14 [*Opera* 25, 317b]).

<sup>11</sup>'Communis et vera sententia est, in simplici apprehensione non esse falsitatem' (*Commentarii*, 61).



So with his claim that our simple apprehensions are always true, Desgabets is heir to a long and respectable tradition. Yet the casual way in which he refers to that tradition conceals the extent to which he departs from it. More precisely, it conceals the fact that the infallibility of simple conception is given a stronger interpretation in Desgabets than in any of the aforementioned authors.<sup>12</sup> A brief look at the way in which they discussed the infallibility of simple apprehension will confirm this.

In his commentary on Aristotle's *De anima*, Aquinas had given two reasons for the claim that the intellect's first operation is incapable of falsity. First of all, Aquinas claimed that simple conceptions cannot be false insofar as non-propositional items just resist evaluation in terms of truth and falsity. To be sure, this is not a very strong kind of infallibility to claim for simple conceptions. But Aquinas also finds a stronger kind of infallibility for the intellect's first operation. Indeed, he believes that our intellect's first operation is always true insofar as our intellects are naturally suited to veridically represent the essences or natures of things.<sup>13</sup> But what does this latter claim amount to, and how does it relate to the position in Desgabets that the intellect's first operation is always true?

As Aquinas explains in his treatise *De ente et essentia*, essences such as human nature are nothing like transcendental Forms or Ideas. As an Aristotelian, he believes that human nature may exist 'in the soul' when one thinks of it but that in extramental reality, there is no humanity but in individual men: 'a nature has two kinds of being: one in singulars, one in the soul'.<sup>14</sup> In simple conception, the intellect abstracts from the individual differences between men to represent only their human nature. And in doing so, it acquires a substantially correct conception of what it is for something to be a man.

In this case, the intellect correctly conceives of a nature that is actually instantiated in extramental reality. But this need not always be the case. Indeed, our intellectual representations of a given nature may outlast the actual instantiation of that nature in extramental reality. For instance, sometime after I have first acquired the conception of a grizzly bear, the species may have gotten extinct. In that situation, Aquinas thinks, my simple conception still gives me a substantially correct idea of what a grizzly is (e.g. a large carnivorous bear), even though it no longer traces a currently instantiated nature. In fact, not only can we simply conceive of natures that once had, but no longer have, being in nature, but we can also form simple conceptions of purely mythical animals, such as the Phoenix. And even in this

<sup>12</sup>Schmaltz too suggests this, but offers no further discussion (*Radical Cartesianism*, 137).

<sup>13</sup>'Et haec intelligentia est in his circa quae non est falsum: tum quia incomplexa non sunt vera neque falsa, tum quia intellectus non decipitur in eo quod quid est, ut infra dicitur' (*Sententia De anima*, 3.5 [*Opera* 45.1, 22]).

<sup>14</sup>... natura duplex habet esse, unum in singularibus et aliud in anima' (*De ente* 3 [*Opera* 43, 374]).

case, Aquinas says, my simple conception will be substantially correct, representing the Phoenix as a bird that arises from its predecessor's ashes. As he puts the point in *De ente*:

Every essence or quiddity can be understood without understanding anything concerning its being, for I can know what a man or a Phoenix is, while being ignorant about whether it has being in nature.<sup>15</sup>

And it is here that we see how Aquinas's claim that simple conceptions are reliable differs from Desgabets's. For Aquinas, it is a claim to the effect that my simple conception of an  $x$  correctly informs me what kind of being an  $x$  is, independently of whether there actually are any  $x$ 's. In Desgabets, however, the claim that simple conceptions are true reduces to the intentionality principle, which says that whenever I simply conceive of  $x$ 's, they actually have some sort of being in extramental reality. On this account, it is quite impossible to conceive of something 'while being ignorant about whether it has being in nature'.

Much like Aquinas, Suárez holds that, strictly speaking, truth and falsity only pertain to judgements. Indeed, he believes that simple conceptions can only be deemed true insofar as they contain some kind of 'implicit' or 'imperfect' judgement. A visual apprehension of whiteness contains the imperfect judgement that something is white, and the intellectual conception of human nature encompasses an implicit judgement that humanity and rationality belong together. According to Suárez, these implicit or imperfect judgements are not judgements proper. So he can retain the distinction between simple apprehension and judgement. The distinction just is not absolute. In fact, it is precisely the proto-judgemental character of simple apprehensions that makes it legitimate to speak of them as true (*Disputationes Metaphysicae* 8. 4.5–7 [*Opera* 25, 291ab]).

Again like Aquinas, Suárez also claims that simple conceptions are substantially correct representations. His argument runs as follows. A simple conception of  $x$  is veridical if it represents the properties of  $x$ . But to the extent that it fails to do this, it also fails to be a conception of  $x$ . Every simple conception of  $x$ , therefore, needs at least to some extent to be veridical.<sup>16</sup> This argument holds independently of whether or not  $x$  currently has

<sup>15</sup> 'Omnis autem essentia vel quidditas potest intelligi sine hoc quod aliquid intelligatur de esse suo; possum enim intelligere quid est homo vel Phoenix, et tamen ignorare an esse habeat in rerum natura' (*De ente* 4 [*Opera* 43, 376]).

<sup>16</sup> ... simplex apprehensio seu cognitio non potest habere difformitatem cum re quae est obiectum eius, esto possit esse difformis aliis rebus, ergo non potest in illa esse falsitas. Minor declaratur in hunc modum ... , quia aut talis res repraesentatur per talem cognitionem vel non. Si non repraesentatur, non est obiectum et ita respectu illius non erit falsus talis actus. Si vero repraesentatur per illam, erit conformitas inter illa ... ergo respectu nullius obiecti potest huiusmodi actus habere falsitatem.

(*Disputationes Metaphysicae* 9.1.14 [*Opera* 25, 317b])

being in extramental reality. According to Suárez's argument, the simple conception of an unactual but possible object such as a golden mountain must represent at least some of the properties that object would have if it did exist. Otherwise, it just would not be a conception of that object.

Simple conceptions of unactual possibilities, then, must at least to some extent be true. But Suárez believes that unactual possibilities have no extramental being at all: outside of thought, they are 'absolutely nothing'.<sup>17</sup> Even the simple conceptions of possible objects that are 'absolutely nothing', then, need to some extent to be true.

That Suárez in fact means his argument to apply to entities that have no extramental being whatsoever shows most clearly in an example he gives involving the simple conception of a chimera. For scholastics such as Suárez, chimeras and goatstags were paradigmatic examples of absolute impossibilities, which, like the squared circle or the married bachelor, combine in themselves incompatible essences.<sup>18</sup> When we simply conceive of a chimera, then, the object of our conception cannot have any real being outside of thought whatsoever. Yet, Suárez explicitly claims that simple conceptions of chimeras are true. They are true, he believes, insofar as they represent what would result if, *per impossibile*, the natures of a lion, a snake, and a goat would be conjoined in one entity.<sup>19</sup>

The difference with Desgabets is clear. On the one hand, Suárez allows for true simple conceptions of things that do not and cannot have any real being outside of thought. On his account, then, saying that simple conceptions are true is not to say that their objects enjoy real being outside of thought. For Desgabets, by contrast, the principle that simple conceptions are true reduces to the intentionality principle. Consequently, to say that a simple conception is true is to say that its object has real extramental being. Whereas Suárez allows for true simple conceptions of things that do not, or even cannot, enjoy real extramental being, this makes absolutely no sense on Desgabets's account.

Thus, the following picture emerges. According to Desgabets, the intentionality principle must be understood to mean that the objects of simple conception always have extramental being. Since mountains without valleys are not objects of simple conception, the intentionality principle does not claim that God's creative act extended to them. Also, Desgabets claims that, when properly understood, his intentionality principle amounts to the scholastic truism that the intellect's first operation is always true. For scholastics

<sup>17</sup>In *Disputationes Metaphysicae* 31.2.5 (*Opera* 26, 230b), Suárez concludes that unactual possibilia are 'omnino nihil'. For helpful discussion, see Doyle, 'Suárez on the Reality of the Possibles'.

<sup>18</sup>For discussion, see Ashworth, 'Chimeras and Imaginary Objects'.

<sup>19</sup>'... cognoscitur id quod consurgeret si hae vel illae partes coniungerentur', and therefore 'est aliqualis veritas simplex in huiusmodi apprehensione, quia revera illud obiectum tale apprehenditur vel cognoscitur quale consurgeret si partes illae in re copularentur' (*Disputationes Metaphysicae* 8.4.7 [*Opera* 25, 291b-292a]).

such as Aquinas and Suárez, simple conceptions are true first of all insofar as, as non-propositional acts of cognition, simple conceptions are not amenable to evaluation in terms of truth and falsity. Moreover, Aquinas held that the simple conception of an  $x$  is true insofar as it gives us a substantially correct grasp of what kind of entity an  $x$  is, and Suárez held that the simple conception of  $x$  needs to be true insofar as it must necessarily represent some of  $x$ 's properties. As we have seen, however, in neither Aquinas nor Suárez did the truth of a simple conception entail the real extramental being of its object. In Desgabets, by contrast, the claim that simple conceptions are true reduces to the intentionality principle, according to which every simple conception has an object with real being outside of thought. In Desgabets, then, the claim that simple conceptions are true has an ontological import that it does not have for his predecessors.

But though he denies that we can simply conceive of impossibilia, Desgabets does allow that we can simply conceive of unactual possibilia. And this seems problematic. For according to the intentionality principle, the things that we can simply conceive of need to have real being outside of thought whenever we do so. But what kind of being can unactual possibilities conceivably have? This issue will be addressed in the next section. As we will see there, Desgabets takes his intentionality principle to derive from Descartes's account of creation. The ontological import that Desgabets, other than his predecessors, gives to the truth of simple conception must be appreciated against that background. But at the same time, we will find that, to explain what kind of extramental being unactual possibilities have, Desgabets also appeals to a scholastic theory. But as before, he interprets that theory in a way that goes well beyond what is found in the scholastic sources. Again, the scholastic echoes in Desgabets's writings cannot be taken at face value.

## UNACTUAL POSSIBILIA

To see how Desgabets deals with unactualized possibilia, we need to consider first what, for Desgabets, would count as an unactual possibility. Like Descartes, Desgabets thinks that everything in reality can be classified as either a substance or a mode. So at first sight, it would seem that there are two kinds of things that could count as unactual possibilities: unactual possible substances, and unactual possible modes. This, however, is not how Desgabets sees things (cf. Cook, 'Desgabets's Representation Principle', 194–9).

According to Desgabets, the concept of a substance that is possible yet not actual makes no sense. This is so because every possible substance has actual existence. Desgabets reaches this conclusion in two steps. First, he claims that God has once given existence to every possible substance: a substance that God did not give existence to would not be conceivable (e.g.

*Supplément*, 240). Second, he claims that substances have indefectible existence. By this he means that once God has created a substance, he does not take away its existence (cf. Easton's 'Desgabets's Indefectibility Thesis'). Consequently, every possible substance has actual existence, and the very concept of a possible yet unactual substance makes no sense.

Both steps that Desgabets takes to reach this conclusion must be understood against the background of his views on divine creation (cf. Lennon, 'Cartesian Dialectic', 348–53). Following Descartes, Desgabets held that God was free to establish the eternal truths. But God was equally free to determine what is possible or even so much as conceivable: 'there is no nature, essence, reality, conceivability or truth among creatures that God has not made or established with sovereign indifference' (*Critique*, 74). Or again, 'before God's decree, there was no reality, truth, and nothing that could be conceived or spoken of' (*Traité*, 80). Now, Desgabets holds that for God to freely make something possible or conceivable is for God to extend his creative activity to it. God's free creation of things was what made them possible or conceivable in the first place, that is. In Desgabets's own words: 'everything has been made at once, and what was not made that first time has remained absolutely impossible, inconceivable and unsayable forever' (*Traité*, 29). Again, Desgabets maintains that before God created, nothing was conceivable but his own nature (*Supplément*, 231–2). Consequently, 'a creature is not possible before it exists' (*Supplément*, 245).<sup>20</sup> This, then, undergirds Desgabets's claim that every possible substance has been created by God.

Desgabets motivates his further claim that created substances have indefectible existence by explaining that substances are a-temporal. Time or duration, for Desgabets, are 'really the same as motion' (*Supplément*, 271; see also *Traité*, 39–52). But motion and change only manifest themselves at the level of a substance's modes, which come and go. The underlying substance itself, by contrast, is a-dynamic and therefore a-temporal. In substances, in other words, 'past, present and future are absolutely the same thing' (*Traité*, 56–7). And because substances are a-temporal, it does not make sense to think of them as existing 'for a while' and ceasing to be 'after

<sup>20</sup>This claim can give the impression that, according to Desgabets, it was impossible for God to create other substances than he in fact did. For a reading of Desgabets along these lines, see Cook, 'Desgabets on the Creation'. But Desgabets also says that God has 'the power to act otherwise than he does in the very moment he gives being to creatures' (*Traité*, 19). Accordingly, Timothy Miller ('Desgabets on Cartesian Minds') has argued that, according to Desgabets, it was possible for God to create other substances than he did, even though it is impossible for us to conceive of them. Perhaps Desgabets's idea was that, given the fact that God has created the substances he has actually created, no other substances remain possible, even though, absolutely and unconditionally speaking, other substances would have been possible. Cf. Schmaltz, *Radical Cartesianism*, 93. I will not go further into this issue here. To show how Desgabets drew on scholastic tradition in articulating his intentionality principle, I concentrate on the ontological status he assigns to possible modes instead.

some time'. As we read in the report of Desgabets's discussions with the Cardinal de Retz held at Commercy, 'it is inconceivable that a thing be destroyed if its existence cannot be extended or prolonged and if it does not have parts that one could give or take away' (Cardinal de Retz, *Discours philosophiques*, 92). Not even God, then, could destroy a substance that he once created (see *Traité*, 56, 63; also, see Schmaltz, *Radical Cartesianism*, 95). Every created substance has indefectible existence. Since every possible substance has been created, every possible substance enjoys indefectible existence. Hence, it makes no sense to speak of possible yet unactual substances.

The only things that could count as unactual possibilities, consequently, are modes. Taken at face value, this looks like a highly restrictive claim about what can count as an unactual possibility. For Desgabets, however, the category of modal beings is much more encompassing than many of us would take it to be. Indeed, Desgabets believes that individual bodies are all modes of an underlying 'matter considered in itself' (*Traité*, 88, 92). By 'matter considered in itself', Desgabets appears to mean 'the total quantity of all extended matter in the universe', considered independently of any particular spatiotemporal organization that it might have. As Patricia Easton points out, this is the single material substance in Desgabets's ontology ('Desgabets's Indefectibility Thesis', 100–2). This ontology allows us to spell out more clearly what, for Desgabets, it means to say that some extended object  $x$  is possible but not actual. It means that  $x$  is a mode that can, but does not actually modify material substance. According to Desgabets's intentionality principle, to say that we can think of such modes is to say that they have real being outside of thought. But how can unactual modes have real being outside of thought?

Desgabets believes that before a mode actually modifies a substance, it is not entirely deprived of being. Rather, he holds that such a mode is already contained in the substance as one of its potential configurations. As such, it has some real extramental being. Desgabets seems to think of a substance as if it were a large lump of clay. We might say that a lump of clay in some sense already contains the shapes that it can take on. Moulding and kneading it, on this view, is just a way of bringing out what somehow is already there. According to Desgabets, this 'being already there' is a kind of being indeed. Similarly, a mode that has ceased to actually modify a substance, does not thereby pass into nothingness. Rather, it retains its being as one of its potential configurations. As Desgabets summarizes his position: 'when we say that a thing is not yet, or that it is no more and that it has lost its being, this must be understood with respect to the being that is called *secundum quid*' (*Critique*, 77–8).<sup>21</sup> Thus, unactual but possible modes such as the body of Caesar or the Antichrist (to use two of Desgabets's own examples [*Supplément*, 222]) are not absolutely nothing. Rather, they have being as possible

<sup>21</sup>Here, 'thing' means 'modal thing'.

modifications of material substance. This even holds true for possible modes that will never enjoy actual existence. Even mountains of pure gold and enchanted palaces, Desgabets claims, have some kind of being as potential configurations of material substance (*Critique*, 66; *Supplément*, 237–8). Indeed, all possible ‘forms and states’ of matter have a ‘being and possibility’, which ‘are real, even when they are only contained in potentiality in their subjects’ (*Supplément*, 179).

Desgabets also says that every possible mode has ‘a very real essence’ (*Traité*, 77). As such, it has a ‘being of essence’ independently of its actual manifestation or ‘being of existence’:

The essential being will be nothing but the mode considered in itself, abstracting from its temporal existence, and its being of existence will consist in its actual existence at a certain moment of time.

(*Supplément*, 241; see also *Traité*, 81–2, 90–1)

Again, after an explanation of how possible modes are contained in their substances independently of whether or not they enjoy actual existence, Desgabets tells his readers that ‘this is the real and true *esse essentiae*’ (*Traité*, 81).

Since all conceivable substances have indefectible existence, this distinction between essential and existential beings does not apply to substances (see *Traité*, 81; *Supplément*, 241, 249). But it allows for a neat classification of modal beings into groups. First of all, there are those modal beings that have both essential and existential being. These are the modes that actually modify a substance. Examples include Mount Everest (which currently modifies material substance) and my current thought (modifying the immaterial substance of my mind).<sup>22</sup> Second, there are the modal beings that have essential being, but which now lack existential being. These are the modes that can, but do not actually modify substance, and this is the category of currently unactual possibilia. Within this category, one might further distinguish between modes with essential being that do not enjoy existential being at any moment of time (golden mountains), and those that do (the body of Caesar). Absolute impossibilities, such as the physical God or the mountain without a valley belong to neither group. Lacking both essential and existential being, these fictions are absolutely nothing at all, in Desgabets’s ontology.

This ontology allows Desgabets to explain how the intentionality principle applies to our thoughts of unactual possibilia. This principle demands that even the objects of such thoughts have extramental being. Desgabets thinks that this demand can be met. Unactual possibilia enjoy some kind of being as potential modifications of substance. They all enjoy essential being, that is. Thus, the requirements of the intentionality principle can be satisfied: whenever we think of an unactual possibility, the object of our thought has real, essential being outside of our minds. But then, essential being does not imply existential

<sup>22</sup>On the substantiality of mind, see Miller, ‘Desgabets on Cartesian Minds’.

being. Therefore, these requirements can be met without saying that every possibility enjoys actual existence. That is, Desgabets can apply his intentionality principle to our thoughts of unactual possibilia, without giving up the intuition that we can think of things that do not actually exist.

As Desgabets himself acknowledges, he is tapping scholastic tradition with his distinction between essential and existential being (see *Traité*, 80–1; *Supplément*, 241).<sup>23</sup> Yet, he also warns his readers that he does not quite use the term ‘essential being’ as it was used in ‘the Schools’ (*Traité*, 81). And indeed, Desgabets’s conception of the essential being as the being that something has as the potential configuration of an indefectible substance is without scholastic precedent. In fact, Desgabets was very critical of the way in which his predecessors had spoken of the essential being: they had ‘infinitely obscured the topic’, proceeding ‘without making any progress in the search for truth’ (*Traité*, 80, 81). This situation raises some questions. First, what exactly did Desgabets take offence at? And second, if traditional theories of the essential being were flawed, why breathe new life into its central concepts? Below, I first draw attention to some genuine points of agreement between scholastic theories of the essential being and Desgabets’s own views on creation. But next, I show that, in spite of these points of agreement, the traditional notion of the essential being sits uneasily with central tenets of Desgabets’s creation doctrine. The agreement was real enough for the conceptual framework of the essential being-ontology to appeal to Desgabets. But the disagreement was sufficiently serious for Desgabets to feel the urge to transform the traditional distinction between existential and essential being.

### Desgabets, Tradition and the Essential Being

In early-modern scholasticism, the ontology of the essential being was typically associated with the philosophy of the thirteenth-century thinker Henry of Ghent. Henry was said to have believed that all possible creatures from eternity enjoy a being of essence. He was believed to have held this view for a number of reasons. I will briefly summarize three of the most important among them.<sup>24</sup> This will help us to see why the conceptual framework of the essential being-ontology might have appealed to Desgabets.

First, Henry’s ontology allowed him to explain how possible creatures can from eternity be known by God. Whatever is known needs to have some kind of real being, or so the argument runs, so that whatever God knows from

<sup>23</sup>Schmaltz suggests that Desgabets might have encountered this terminology in Spinoza. But Schmaltz grants that there is no evidence that Desgabets knew Spinoza or his works (*Radical Cartesianism*, 103).

<sup>24</sup>For these reasons, see, for example, Suárez, *Disputationes Metaphysicae* 31.2.6 (*Opera* 26, 230b) and Francisco Albertinus, *Corrolaria*, 5–6. On Albertinus, see di Vona, *Studi sulla scolastica*, 93–109.



eternity must therefore eternally enjoy some kind of being. Second, Henry's ontology allowed him to differentiate between the possible and the impossible: only what has at least essential being is possible, whereas what lacks even essential being belongs to the realm of the goatstags and chimaeras (see also Henry's *Quodlibet* 3.9 [*Quodlibeta*, vol. 1, 61OP]). Third, there need to be truth-makers for the eternal truths. If it is to be eternally true that men are rational animals, there need from eternity to be something to make that true. Since men and animals are the obvious candidates for fulfilling the role of such truth-makers, men and animals need from eternity to have some kind of being. Because neither men nor animals from eternity enjoy actual existence, this being needs to be weaker than full-blooded being of existence. And the kind of being that is weaker than actual existence, yet strong enough to undergird the eternal truths, is the being of essence.<sup>25</sup>

The brief summary of these three arguments allows us to see some affinity between the essential being-ontology that was typically ascribed to Henry of Ghent and Desgabets's own ideas. On both accounts, for something to be thought of is for it to have at least some kind of being. Again, both views hold that the watershed between the possible and the impossible is an ontological one. To be possible, indeed, is to have at least essential being. Lastly, Desgabets was sympathetic to the kind of 'truth-maker argument' summarized above. According to Desgabets, it is impossible for a proposition to be true without there being something to make it true: 'it would be absurd to say that if there were neither wholes or parts, nor an intellect to think of them, there would be a truth according to which the whole is greater than its part' (cf. *Critique*, 75–6; *Supplément* 209, 232, 250). Desgabets believes that eternal truths regarding substances are made true by the indefectible existence of all conceivable substances. Again, the essential being that modal beings indefectibly enjoy accounts for the eternal truth of propositions that regard modes. In Desgabets's own words:

since they [the eternal truths] could not be eternally true if they had no objects to conform with, and because they pertain to everything in the world, it is demonstrated once again by this reason that all substances and their modes are immutable by nature, so that there is a contradiction in saying that they can be destroyed.

(*Supplément*, 270)

To be sure, these are rather general points of agreement, which do not align Desgabets with Henry of Ghent or his followers uniquely. Thus, even though they were critical of Henry's being of essence, the claim that the

<sup>25</sup>On this argument for the essential being, see also Suárez, *Disputationes Metaphysicae* 31.1.8 and 12.38–47 (*Opera* 26, 234b and 294b–298b).

divide between the possible and the impossible is an ontological one was also defended by some Scotists (cf. Hoffmann, *Creatura intellecta*, 263–304). Again, Scotists such as John Poncius also used truth-maker arguments to show that wholes and parts need from eternity to have some kind of ‘diminished being’ to make it eternally true that the whole is bigger than its part (see Poncius, *Cursus philosophicus*, 903a). In fact, Desgabets himself at one point ascribes such arguments to Duns Scotus, Henry of Ghent, and Peter Auriol. According to Desgabets, truth-maker arguments had led these and other scholastics to say things that are congenial to his own indefectibility-thesis:

the subtle Scotus, Henry of Ghent, Auriol and some others could not resist giving some kind of indefectible being to creatures. This was not truly an actual being of existence (as they speak), but a weaker being and an essence that is not nothing, because it contains all the attributes of a thing regarding which eternally true propositions are formed.<sup>26</sup>

(*Traité*, 26)

Also, the points of convergence discussed leave Desgabets with plenty of room for disagreement with traditional accounts of the essential being. And indeed, we have seen that Desgabets at times speaks rather critically of the way in which his predecessors had understood the being of essence. But what exactly explains his critical stance towards the essential being of scholastic tradition? What is the bone of contention between Desgabets and ‘the metaphysicians’? Most clearly, Desgabets criticizes his predecessors for failing to see that the distinction between essential and existential being is applicable to modes only. Speaking as if existential and essential being could come apart in substances, they were led to believe that the concept of a possible substance that lacks actual existence makes sense (*Supplément*, 241). Moreover, speaking of the essential being, some scholastics were led to say that possible creatures ‘have *ab aeterno* some being of possibility independently from God’ (*Traité*, 81; see also *Supplément*, 208–9). Below, I show that in early-modern discussions, the essential being was indeed often portrayed as something that escaped divine causation and which, in the words of one scholastic, came close to being a kind of demigod. Taking a closer look at these discussions, then, will help us see more clearly why the essential being as it was traditionally understood would have constituted an anomaly in Desgabets’s voluntarist ontology.

<sup>26</sup>According to his editors, Desgabets is here bracketing thinkers who held rather different views. However, Desgabets really makes the quite specific claim that these thinkers used truth-maker arguments to argue that creatures have some being independently of their actual existence. But this is not to overlook the real differences between thinkers from different traditions.

### God and the Essential Being in Scholastic Philosophy

According to Henry of Ghent, the essential being depended upon God as on an exemplar or model. In his own words, ‘everything that is a creature formally has its essential being from something else as from an exemplary cause’.<sup>27</sup> This ‘something else’ to which the essential being relates to as to an exemplar is God, or, more precisely, his ideas: ‘the divine essence according to its ideas is the exemplary form in virtue of which the essences of creatures are what they are’.<sup>28</sup>

In saying that the essential being is exemplarily caused by God, Henry is distinguishing it from the existential being. For contrary to the essential being, the existential being related to God as to an efficient cause:

And thus, the essences or forms as it were flow from their source in two ways. First, with regard to their essential being, by way of some kind of formal imitation. And in another way, with regard to their existential being, by way of some production.<sup>29</sup>

When he speaks of the ‘production’ of the existential being by God, Henry thinks of God as exercising his efficient causality: ‘the existential being, insofar as it is a similitude produced by God, is according to an efficient cause’.<sup>30</sup> As Henry put it elsewhere: ‘an essence is said to be something from its relation to God insofar as he eternally is its exemplar. It is said to exist from its relation to God insofar as he effects it at some moment of time’.<sup>31</sup>

Henry’s theory, with its distinction between the efficient causation of existential beings and the exemplary causation of essential beings, was widely discussed by scholastic authors in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Suárez, for instance, related Henry’s view that

the essence as such does not relate to God as an efficient cause, but only as an exemplar, while existence adds to the essence a relation to God as an efficient cause.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>27</sup> ‘Omnis autem res quae creatura est formaliter habet esse essentiae suae ab alio ut a causa exemplari’ (*Summa* 21.3 [*Summa*, vol. 1, 126G]).

<sup>28</sup>. ... divina essentia secundum rationes ideales est forma exemplaris qua essentiae creaturarum sunt id quod sunt’ (*Quodlibet* 9.2 [*Opera* 13, 37]).

<sup>29</sup> ‘Et secundum hoc essentiae sive formae rerum quasi dupliciter fluunt a primo: uno modo per quondam imitationem formalem, et hoc quoad esse essenziale ... ; alio modo per quondam productionem, et hoc quoad esse existentiae’ (*Quodlibet* 8. 9 [*Quodlibeta*, vol. 2, 320 K]).

<sup>30</sup> ‘Est vero dicta participatio divini esse in essentia, esse existentiae, in quantum est similitudo producta a divino esse secundum rationem causae efficientis’ (*Quodlibet* 10.8 [*Opera* 14, 202]).

<sup>31</sup>. ... essentia enim ut dictum est, dicitur res ex respectu ad Deum, in quantum ab ipso exemplata est ab aeterno. Dicit autem existens ex respectu ad Deum in quantum ipsa est effectus eius ex tempore’ (*Summa* 21.4 [*Summa*, vol. 1, 127Q]).

<sup>32</sup>. ... essentia ut sic non respicit Deum ut causam efficientem, sed ut exemplarem tantum; existentia vero addit essentiae respectum ad Deum ut causam efficientem’ (*Disputationes Metaphysicae* 31.5.17 [*Opera* 26, 247a]).

Also, this view was hotly discussed by scholastic thinkers after Suárez. Thus, it was taken over by the Jesuit Francisco Albertinus, but it was reviewed critically by such thinkers as the Jesuit Francisco de Oviedo and the Franciscans Poncius and Mastrius.<sup>33</sup> Consequently, it would not have been difficult for Desgabets to come across Henry's idea that, while the existential being is efficiently caused by God, the essential being rather relates to God as to an exemplary cause.

At this point, we begin to see how Desgabets departs from his scholastic predecessors concerning the essential being. Firstly, we have seen that according to Henry of Ghent, God exemplarily causes the essential being through his ideas. But the ideas in the divine mind precede God's creation. Therefore, the causation of the essential being precedes God's creative act. Not so in Desgabets. For him, a being of essence just is a possible modification of a substance that God has created. Hence, the causation of the essential being coincides with God's creation of that substance. In Desgabets, then, the essential being cannot precede divine creation, but rather results from it.

Secondly and relatedly, Henry's view seems to be that the essential being is exemplarily, but not efficiently caused by God. But from Desgabets's perspective, speaking of an essential being that is not efficiently caused by God cannot make any sense. For as Desgabets understands voluntarism, it says that, before God engaged in his creative act, nothing was conceivable but God himself (cf. *Supplément*, 245). God's efficient causation determines the limits of what we can conceive, that is. Consequently, an essential being that somehow escapes God's efficient causation is beyond conceivability. Desgabets's reservations against the essential being of his predecessors appear to be rooted in fundamental tenets of his thought, then. In fact, a closer look at the way in which Henry's theory was being discussed and received by seventeenth-century scholastics reveals an even stronger ground for Desgabets to feel uncomfortable with the essential being of his predecessors.

For ever since Duns Scotus, philosophers and theologians had questioned the consistency of Henry's idea that God exemplarily causes the essential being without being its efficient cause. As Scotus commented on Henry's theory:

It does not seem plausible to assign a different effect to the exemplary to the efficient cause, as he does, because the exemplary cause is nothing but some kind of efficient cause.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>33</sup>For Albertinus, see *Corollaria*, 10b–11a, 11b; Oviedo, *Philosophiae*, 276a; Poncius, *Cursus philosophicus*, 905b; see also Aversa, *Philosophia*, 249ab).

<sup>34</sup>Praeterea, quod attribuit alium effectum causae exemplari et causae efficienti, non videtur probabile, quia causa exemplaris non est nisi quoddam efficiens' (*Ordinatio* 1.36 q. un. [*Opera* 6, 279–80]).

Also in explicit opposition to Henry of Ghent, Suárez puts forth the same view in his twenty-fifth *Metaphysical Disputation*. Suárez reasons as follows. An exemplar is something that we seek to imitate.<sup>35</sup> As such it regulates and determines the way in which we act.<sup>36</sup> More precisely, Suárez sees an exemplar as something that shapes and determines the will of an agent. But the will, insofar as it moves our executing powers, is a kind of efficient cause. Consequently, the same holds true of the exemplar:

The will, which moves an executing power, is a kind of efficient cause. Therefore, the same is true of the art that directs and determinates it. But this art directs and determinates the will via an exemplar. Therefore, the exemplar belongs to the same kind of cause.<sup>37</sup>

In other words, exemplary causation can be reduced to efficient causation (*Disputationes Metaphysicae* 25.2 [*Opera* 25, 910b-916b]). But if that is so, then to deny that the essential being is efficiently caused by God is *ipso facto* deny that it has been exemplarily caused by God. But then, if the essential being is neither efficiently nor exemplarily caused by God, it becomes hard to see how it is causally dependent upon God at all. It is no surprise, then, that Suárez sometimes speaks of Henry's essential being as something that is fully independent of divine causation: 'the essences of things from themselves have a kind of essential being ... , which accrues to creatures independently of God'.<sup>38</sup>

Arguments along these lines were to become a recurrent theme in early-modern scholastic discussions of the essential beings. Thus, Francisco de Oviedo argued that 'an exemplar is that, by looking at which, an agent acts. Hence, where there is no agent, by whom the exemplar is looked at, this kind of causality can have no place'. Therefore, if the essential being relates to God as an exemplary cause only, this means that the essential being enjoys full independence from God's causal powers: 'but this actual being that essences have from eternity does not depend from some kind of agent: therefore, it does not depend on some exemplar

<sup>35</sup> ... respondetur ... exemplar esse, ad cuius similitudinem fit effectus, et quod artifex imitatur operando'. (*Disputationes Metaphysicae* 25.1.41 [*Opera* 25, 910a]). On the difference between exemplars and ends, see 25.1.40 and 25.2.14 (*Opera* 25, 910a, 915a).

<sup>36</sup> ... exemplar ... dirigit vel determinat actionem agentis' (*Disputationes Metaphysicae* 25.2.14 [*Opera* 25, 915a]).

<sup>37</sup> ... voluntas, ut movens potentiam exequentem, pertinet ad genus causae efficientis; ergo et ars ut dirigens et determinans illam; dirigit autem et determinat mediante exemplari: ergo exemplar ad idem genus causae pertinet' (*Disputationes Metaphysicae* 25.2.13 [*Opera* 25, 915a]). For the reference to Henry's *Quodlibet* 9.2, see 912b.

<sup>38</sup> Scotus, in allegata dist. 36, impugnat Henricum, eo quod variis locis asseruerit rerum ex se habere quoddam esse essentiae, quod vocat esse reale, aeternum et improductum, conveniens creaturis independenter a Deo' (*Disputationes Metaphysicae* 31.2.1 [*Opera* 26, 229a-b]).

either'.<sup>39</sup> Similar arguments are found in Raphael Aversa and Poncius, and Mastrius compared Henry's essential beings to some kind of 'demigods', which enjoy considerable autonomy with regard to divine causation.<sup>40</sup>

We are now in the position to see more clearly the rationale behind Desgabets's dismissive treatment of the scholastic essential being. According to the principal proponent of the essential being in the Middle Ages, the divine intellect served as an exemplary cause of the essential being, even though God's efficient causality did not extend to the essential being. On this view, then, the essential being enjoyed some, but no absolute, independence from God. Ever since Scotus, however, scholastic thinkers had challenged the consistency of this view, pointing out that to deny efficient causality is *ipso facto* to deny exemplary causality. Consequently, it was widely believed that, properly understood, Henry's position amounted to the view that the essential being was fully independent of God. This explains why Desgabets claims that their discussions of the essential being had led some scholastics to think of possible creatures as having '*ab aeterno* some being of possibility independently from God'. And needless to say, this flies in the face of everything Desgabets wants to say about possibility and the nature of the essential being. As he put the point himself in the *Supplément*:

God ... is the maker and creator of all things in the world, no matter what kind of being they may have; whether it be their being of essence or their being of existence and truth.

(*Supplément*, 208)

The ground covered above thus suggests the following picture. Desgabets was in a basic agreement with authors who, like Henry of Ghent, had endorsed some distinction between essential and existential being. Like them, Desgabets felt that the being of possibilities is a kind of being indeed. Also, he agreed that the essential being can serve as a truth-maker of eternally true propositions. Yet, Desgabets also found the essential being as it was typically understood in scholastic treatments of the topic to be fundamentally flawed. So, Desgabets transformed the essential being. As he saw it, the essential being was grounded as a potential modification in a substance on which God had bestowed indefectible existence. Thus, Desgabets regimented the free-floating being of essence that many scholastics had

<sup>39</sup> ... *exemplar est id, ad quod respiciens agens operatur*: Ergo ubi non intercedit agens, à quo respiciatur exemplar, huius causalitas intercedere non potest: sed illud esse actuale quod habent ab aeterno essentiae rerum non dependet ab aliquot agente: ergo neque ab aliquot exemplari.

(*Philosophiae*, 276a)

<sup>40</sup>See Poncius, *Cursus Philosophicus*, 905b; Aversa, *Philosophia*, 249ab; Mastrius, *Cursus philosophiae*, vol. 5, 20b).

found in thinkers like Henry of Ghent, subjecting it firmly to the efficient causation of God.

## CONCLUSIONS

Desgabets has powerfully been portrayed as a radical Cartesian. Exploring the ultimate consequences of Descartes's doctrines, Desgabets took Cartesianism farther at points where Descartes himself had been hesitant. Sometimes, this meant taking Descartes in directions where Descartes himself never went. This is particularly clear in the case of Desgabets's intentionality principle. Although for Desgabets, this principle is related to the Cartesian doctrine of creation, it is not clear that Descartes himself would have taken his voluntarism about creation to entail the position in Desgabets that the object of every thought needs to have real extramental being. Indeed, as Desgabets himself recognizes, his intentionality principle is hard to square with the kind of radical doubt Descartes entertains in the *Meditations*. It is no surprise, therefore, that scholars have looked at other traditions to appreciate Desgabets's principle. The intentionality principle, it has been argued, might owe more to scholasticism than to Descartes.

But as we have seen, Desgabets's relation to scholasticism is more complicated than scholars have recognized, or than Desgabets himself sometimes wants us to believe. The intentionality principle is, despite seeming similarities, quite different from late-medieval claims about intuitive cognition. Moreover, although Desgabets says his intentionality principle really amounts to the scholastic truism that simple conceptions cannot be false, these words mean something different in Desgabets's mouth than in that of his predecessors. Again, Desgabets was sympathetic to the idea that only impossibilia lack all being and that whatever is possible has an essential being that is sufficiently strong to ground the eternal truths. But he criticized his predecessors for failing to see the fundamental distinction between substances and their modes. Moreover, he relocated the essential being in the substances to which God bestowed indefectible existence. Not only did this demystify the essential being, but it also made the essential being subject to God's efficient causality. Thus, the essential being-ontology was made to fit the views of creation that Desgabets took himself to have developed in the wake of Descartes.

In sum, Desgabets's intentionality principle may have been neither straightforwardly Cartesian nor scholastic. To be sure, Desgabets was inspired by Descartes's doctrine of creation, and in scholasticism he found expressions and concepts that he thought useful to further articulate his views. But in the end, Desgabets was happy, sometimes explicitly, to move beyond Descartes. And if Faye may be right to say that Desgabets was moulded by the disputes and questions of scholastic tradition, we

have seen that he also was quite happy to mould scholasticism at its turn, and make it better fit his own, fascinating, metaphysics.

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University of Groningen

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